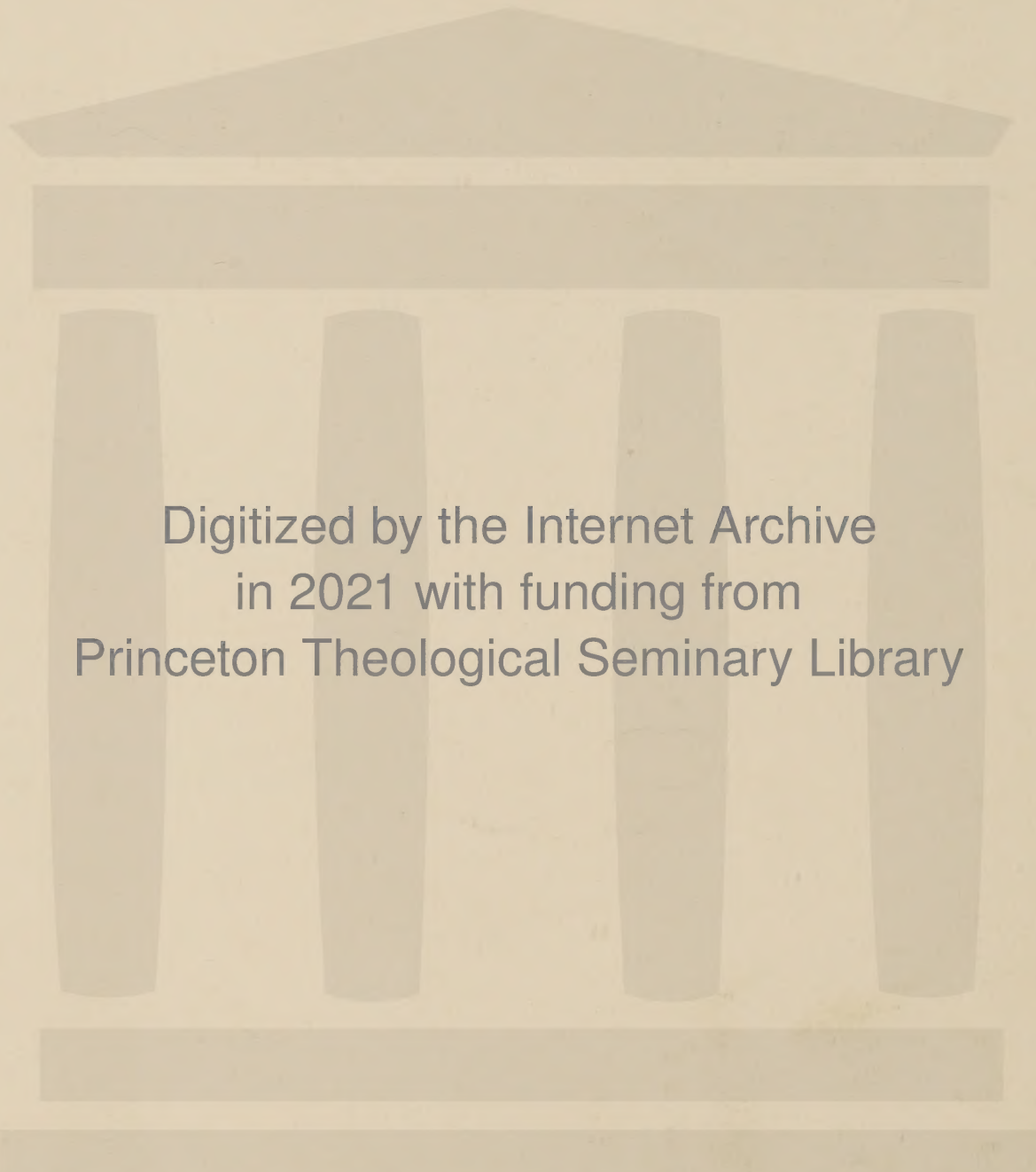


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that the light of God's truth may shine bright and increase

DOUBLE ISSUE

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*Stand at the crossroads and look
Ask for the old paths, where the good way is
Walk in it, and find rest for your souls*

JEREMIAH 6:16

The Princeton Theological Review

Dedicated to the Rev. Dr. Charles Hodge (1797-1878)

Professor of Systematic Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary

Executive Editor JAY WESLEY RICHARDS

SBN 372, P. O. Box 5204, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ 08543 email: 372jwr@ptsmail.ptsem.edu

Managing Editor ELISABETH ROBERTSON KENNEDY

SBN 516, P. O. Box 5204, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ 08543 email: 516elk@ptsmail.ptsem.edu

Arts and Culture Editor JONATHON S. BRENNER

SBN 312, P. O. Box 5204, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ 08543 email: 357jsb@ptsmail.ptsem.edu

Book Review Editor THOMAS VITO AIUTO

SBN 053, P. O. Box 5204, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ 08543 email: 053tva@ptsmail.ptsem.edu

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From the Editors

Imagine that you are standing in the Fellowship Hall after church, enjoying a cookie and some bland red punch, when suddenly you are approached by an acquaintance with an eager look in his eye.

"I hear that you're headed for seminary. That's good! I have one piece of advice for you: *Don't lose your faith!*" Following this admonishment comes a tragic tale of some naïve soul who entered the dark labyrinth of the religious academic life (usually at a mainline seminary) with a simple, solid faith, and emerged an apathetic agnostic thanks to an academic program and professors aimed solely at undermining the foundations of Christianity.

Sound familiar? Unfortunately, too many of us have been confronted with the popular misconception that a doctrinally sound, evangelical Christianity is, by and large, incompatible with the life of study. In some circles it is assumed that seminary will erode the cornerstone that faith is built upon. According to this view, not only is what is taught in the academy incongruent with what the faithful believe, but the seminary student may, because of the constant study of divine things, soon see them as common and customary, until all mystery and love and zeal are gone, leaving only indifference.

There is a modicum of truth in this stereotype. Seminary can be a place of doubt, and in pursuing any religious degree one will certainly encounter troubling questions and new answers that one has never considered. But to think of seminary as a place where one necessarily will lose faith, or worse, as a place that is separate and disconnected from a vital, pious practice of Christianity, is a terrible mistake. Just as old as these old assumptions about the chasm between the academic life and the religious life have been around, so too have there been helpful antidotes to such views. In his pamphlet entitled "The Religious Life of Theological Students," B.B. Warfield examined the false choice between the spiritual life and the academic:

Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these two things over against one another. Recruiting officers do not dispute whether it is

better for soldiers to have a right leg or a left leg: soldiers should have both legs . . . Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God?

In this short essay, B.B. Warfield gives a cogent examination of what it means to be a Christian and to be an academic. Warfield makes it clear that as students we must continue to regularly observe our usual (or even a more devout) regimen of spiritual disciplines: Scripture reading, prayer, meditation, and corporate worship, to name a few; but just as important, we must never divorce our studies from the very Lord who has called us. Warfield urges,

. . . take seriously your theological study, not merely as a duty, done for God's sake and therefore made divine, but as a religious exercise, itself charged with religious blessing to you; as fitted by its very nature to fill all your mind and heart and soul and life with divine thoughts and feelings and aspirations and achievements.

Seminary students at PTS and elsewhere would be wise to track down and read this classic little essay from the bearded bulwark of Old Princeton—or, for that matter, anything by Archibald Alexander or Charles Hodge on the religious life. All three professors gave regular lectures and sermons at the seminary on these very issues. Although Old Princeton is often remembered by some as a reactionary institution (when it is remembered at all by the present institution), at its best it should be remembered as a place where piety and scholarship found a unique balance. We at the seminary today should work to cultivate a similar balance between our studies and our spiritual lives—two parts of the Christian life which must not be divided. Then, perhaps, you will have just the answer for that acquaintance as you gather around the punch bowl in your home church.

PTR

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

—Matthew 22: 37

Response to Dean L. Overman*

Is There Room for God and Stephen Hawking in the Same Universe?

D. MATTHEW STITH

In his excellent article in the *PTR* (February 1998),¹ Dean Overman raises the intriguing question of the compatibility of Stephen Hawking's no-boundary proposal and a Christian view of creation. His primary point, that Hawking does not explicitly consider or reject the possibility that God functions as *causa essendi*, or cause of continuing existence, to the universe, is well-argued and, as far as it goes, quite correct. It seems, however, that Overman's analysis leaves room for some accommodation between Christians and adherents of Hawking's proposal. Since Hawking doesn't exclude God's functioning as the continuing sustainer of a no-boundary universe, why can't this sphere of divine activity stand as common ground between Christians and no-boundary cosmologists?

I will argue first that the ontological and epistemological assumptions required by the no-boundary proposal are substantially in conflict with the Christian doctrine of creation. Second, despite Hawking's lack of any explicit denial of God as *causa essendi*, I will claim that the proposal, based on the assumptions mentioned above, implicitly disallows any such function for God that would be compatible with this doctrine. In short, there is no room at all for accommodation.

According to Daniel Migliore, any Christian doctrine of creation must assume "the radical otherness, transcendence, and lordship of God."² One implication of this affirmation is that God is not part of the universe, nor vice versa. Christianity rejects, on the one hand, the Aristotelian notion of a God who is merely the highest order of being in the cosmos, and, on the other, the panentheist idea of the universe as a necessary part of God's being. The creator God of Christian belief can never be ontologically identified with the creation, either to individual beings or to the whole (with the unique exception of the incarnate Christ).

Hawking does not appear to take an explicit position on the question of God's "location" within or outside the universe. Thus, there seems to be room in his proposal for a God who is not "just another being." However, a closer look at the ontological status of God in Hawking's model raises serious questions for Christians. According to the no-boundary proposal, even if God did create the universe, the

immutable laws of physics left few³ or no⁴ choices (depending on which of the proposal's various incarnations one considers) as to the initial conditions and functionality of the universe created. Thus, God (whose role is conceded as a possibility, nothing more) is significantly bound by the laws of physics. It is critical to note that Hawking clearly grants these laws an ontological priority over God. It is not the case, in the no-boundary universe, that God simply chooses to abide by these laws, or decides which laws to apply.⁵ I find that, as regards this implication of the doctrine of creation, Hawking's proposal is substantially in conflict with the traditional Christian understanding.

A necessary companion to the assertion of God's otherness, transcendence, and lordship is that of creation's absolute, radical dependence on God.⁶ This affirmation of the dependence of all creatures and all of creation on God entails more than a vague acknowledgment that God is somehow responsible for our being here. Specifically, this affirmation implies that our creaturely dependence is absolute, continuing, and all-encompassing. We, as creatures, are dependent on the Creator not just for our origin, but also for our continued existence and all of the components of that existence.

In the case of human beings, one component of that existence is the ability and tendency to ask questions about the universe, our place in it, and related issues. The uniqueness of this capacity to humankind has been noted and built upon by thinkers at least as far back as Aristotle, for whom the raising of such issues was at once the defining characteristic and the ultimate purpose of humanity. Even a cursory reading of Hawking reveals that he is interested in much the same issue: How can we know anything about the universe? Hawking's answer relies on the principle of evolution by natural selection.⁷ The development of an intelligence with the ability to correlate and draw correct conclusions from the data gathered by our senses about the workings of the world around us had a substantial survival advantage, and so was gradually selected. Thus, we would only have survived as a species if our faculties were capable of correctly deducing the principles governing the universe in which we live. If our ability to discern the laws of nature, at least in an instrumental sense, was the criterion for our development and survival as a species, it only makes sense

D. Matthew Stith is an M.Div. Senior at Princeton Theological Seminary.

*Article published in the *PTR* 5, no. 1 (Feb. 1998).

¹Dean L. Overman, "Causa Essendi and Stephen Hawking's Question," *Princeton Theological Review* 5, no. 1 (February 1998): 7-12.

²Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 84.

³Stephen Hawking, *Black Holes and Baby Universes and Other Essays* (New York: Bantam, 1993), 98.

⁴Hawking, 1988, 174.

⁵Hawking, 1993, 98.

⁶Migliore, 86.

⁷Hawking, 1993, 130.

to continue trusting those abilities as we search for the ultimate answers about those laws and the universe they govern.⁸

As a cosmologist, Hawking, of course, has a vested interest in the claim that human intellectual endeavor can uncover the secrets of the universe, and he makes that explicit claim frequently, although he moderates his stand slightly in his later writings to the point where our chances of discovering all of the cosmic laws are fifty-fifty.⁹ The most important question for the compatibility of Hawking's proposal with this implication of the doctrine of creation, however, is not that of the odds, or even of the possibility of our achieving such knowledge. The real issue is the source of our ability to reach any such conclusions at all. If humanity, just as the rest of creation, is wholly dependent on God, then the faculties by which we reach for knowledge must be ours by the action of the Creator. Does Hawking's attribution of these faculties to the "natural" process of evolution conflict with such a belief? There are certainly those who would answer in the affirmative. However, it seems that many, if not most, Christian theologians today do not find the theory of natural selection per se to be incompatible with Christian belief. Indeed, Pope John Paul II recently declared the theory officially acceptable to the Roman Catholic church, once a bulwark of anti-Darwinism. Thus, the use of natural selection does not automatically mean that Hawking's proposal is theologically unacceptable.

There is, however, the matter of who or what is governing the selection process. Hawking claims that the selection of some genetic changes and the deselection of others is entirely driven by the universal laws that we are now seeking. Thus, our intelligence and survival depend on the existence, consistency, and content of those laws, not on the benevolence of God. Even this claim might be palatable to Christians, if those laws were of God's institution and crafting, but, as has been discussed above, the no-boundary proposal makes God subject to the laws, not vice versa. Once again, the ontological priority granted the laws of nature by Hawking's proposal leads to the conclusion that the model conflicts with the Christian doctrine of creation.

Some would claim that Hawking makes room for God by allowing that there are areas of human experience that physics cannot describe.¹⁰ However, as stated above, the affirmation of creation's dependence on God includes all of creation, not just the domains of it which are inconvenient for physical laws to deal with. Even if Hawking's statement is construed as an attempt to allow God some ground, so to speak, it does not go far enough to satisfy the doctrine. A God who is subject to the laws of physics even in a limited way is not the God of the Christian creation.

A second major implication of affirming the dependence of creation is that God alone is a necessary being. All of

creation is, by contrast, contingent. Without God, who is self-sufficient and depends on nothing else for existence, nothing else could be, and the universe and all that is in it could only come into being through God. This understanding is fundamental to the Christian understanding of our relationship to God and to the world.¹¹

At first glance, it seems that Hawking's proposal allows for such a relationship. Regardless of whether God is subject to natural laws or not, it is God who gets the ball rolling, so to speak. There is still freedom for God to create or not, so God's action is therefore necessary, and the creation contingent upon that action. This analysis does indeed seem to establish necessity, at least in the sense of Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" or "First Cause." However, a closer analysis of Hawking's statements casts considerable doubt on such a conclusion. He reduces God's agency in creation to a matter of personal preference ("Why does the universe bother to exist? *If you like* [my italics], you can define God to be the answer to that question."),¹² and even proposes that a grand unified theory might well be "so compelling that it brings about its own existence."¹³ From this point, it requires only a quick application of Occam's razor to excise the superfluous agency of the Creator and leave the grand unified theory unchallenged. Can a God whose involvement in creation is only a possibility be described as necessary in the classical sense? While there may not be out-and-out conflict between Hawking's theory and the doctrine of creation on this point, their coexistence is uneasy at best. That there are fundamental differences in ontology and epistemology between the no-boundary proposal and the doctrine of creation is beyond doubt.

We now turn to the specific question of God as *causa essendi* raised by Overman. Few claims are as important to Christianity in general, as well as the doctrine of creation in particular, as this one. The continuing involvement of God in the sustenance of the universe is essential to Christology, soteriology, and eschatology, to name only a few of the most significant areas. Without an active, involved God, there would be no Messiah sent to save the world. There would be no salvation, no hope of a life beyond the earthly one, and no release from the reign of sin. Clearly, no model of the universe which denies God's continued involvement can coexist with Christianity, when the very basis of the Christian faith is the action and involvement of God the Son and God the Spirit, as well as God the Father in the life of the cosmos. I will demonstrate that Hawking's assumptions, as discussed above, implicitly deny God's activity in this sphere.

The deists of the Enlightenment likened God to a clockmaker, who designed the universe, set up the laws by which it would function, wound it up, and let it go, only observing its progress from that point on. Such a view of God was, for the reasons outlined above, hostile to traditional Christianity. Many critics have accused Hawking of holding a similar view, based on statements like the following, regarding the laws of nature: "These laws may have

⁸This description of Hawking's position is a synthesis of his writings throughout *Brief History* and *Baby Universes*, and cannot be readily referenced to any particular spot.

⁹Hawking, 1993, 128.

¹⁰Joseph M. Zycinski, "Metaphysics and Epistemology in Stephen Hawking's Theory of the Creation of the Universe," *Zygon* 31, no. 2: 283.

¹¹Migliore, 86.

¹²Hawking, 1993, 173.

¹³*Ibid.*, 98.

been ordained by God, but it seems that He does not intervene in the universe to break the laws."¹⁴ However, based on the analysis above, it seems that Hawking in fact goes even further than did the deists.

In the no-boundary universe, not only does God not appear to intervene on the laws (i.e., by raising the dead or changing water into wine), but, given the lofty ontological status of those laws, God cannot intervene. In addition, Hawking calls into question even his own statement that God may have ordained the laws initially, by pointing out that God's choices may well have been limited, or non-existent, because of the preexistent necessity of laws that are "self-consistent and . . . lead to complicated beings like ourselves."¹⁵ God has been placed in subjugation not only to the laws of nature, but to the strictures of scientific logic and the anthropic principle as well. If the deistic God was no more than a clockmaker, Hawking's God is an assembly-line worker whose only job is to press a button to turn on the power for a massive, fully automated, deterministic machine. To carry the metaphor one step further, in the no-boundary universe, God cannot even intervene to fine-tune the machine or stop the line. In this respect, there appears to be very little similarity between the God of Hawking's universe and the Christian God who serves as *causa essendi* for all of creation.

The Christian understanding of God as creator holds that God's actions, both as *causa fieri* (cause of becoming, related to the initial act of creation) and *causa essendi*, be purposive and, as a result, that the creation be "dynamic and purposeful."¹⁶ This assertion of God's purposiveness also implies that, assuming God did create the universe, this creation was not by accident or caprice. In the Christian tradition, the creation is understood to have taken place by and for the Word of God, in fulfillment of God's eternal design. The Scriptural stories of the relationship of God with the people of Israel, culminating with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, testify to the nature and centrality of this purpose.

Hawking also takes great pains to deny that the universe was created at the whim of an arbitrary God.¹⁷ The notion of a purposive creation is very much in keeping with his model. However, he locates that purpose in a quite different place than does the Christian view. Hawking's desire to demonstrate creation's purpose is rooted in the necessity of such a purpose for constructing a model of the universe. Cosmologists require an ordered unified cosmos to describe. Not surprisingly, Hawking finds that purpose in the very laws he seeks. If, for the Christian, God created the universe by and for the Word, the no-boundary universe was created by and for the laws of physics. The possible configurations and histories of our universe are limited, under Hawking's proposal, to those which abide by these laws and which ultimately produce intelligent life which can understand them.¹⁸

The affirmation that God's creative activity has a purpose also implies, if one accepts the claim that God continues to be active in creation, that this continuing activity of the triune God is also for and toward a goal. That goal is defined by Christian theology as the ultimate redemption, transformation, and renewal of all creation. Clearly, the purpose of God's action in history is closely related to the purpose of God's initial act of creation. Of course, Hawking does not endorse the idea that God intervenes in the universe at all, so this point is somewhat academic. Nevertheless, even if we assume that the no-boundary model does allow God to act, it seems that the purposive nature of that action is compromised. Since any continuing action on God's part is related in purpose to the original creative act, and Hawking's proposal requires that such a purpose be defined by the laws of nature and the anthropic principle, as seen above, God is not able to be truly purposive in a no-boundary universe. If the universe is moving inevitably toward a purpose which the Creator was not at liberty to set, then, even if we allow for God's continued action, that action cannot be freely purposive either. Such restriction of God's motives and goals is just as incompatible with Christian beliefs as expressed in the doctrine of creation as is the restriction of God's actions. It seems that the no-boundary proposal, despite its lack of explicit attention to God's role as *causa essendi* of the universe, is finally incompatible with any Christian conception of such a role.

Stephen Hawking is quite frustrating for the theologian seeking to engage in dialogue with contemporary science. Analyses like Overman's, and even Hawking's own comments offer provocative hints of compatibility with a Christian perspective:

[E]ven if there is only one unique set of possible laws, it is only a set of equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to govern? . . . Although science may solve the problem of how the universe began, it cannot answer the question: Why does the universe bother to exist? I don't know the answer to that.¹⁹

It would be easy to say that God is the answer to these questions, or that God can still function as *causa essendi* of a no-boundary universe. Yet the same paragraph that holds out hope for accommodation also shows signs of the ontological and epistemological decisions which Hawking has made in his pursuit of understanding which ultimately prevent the no-boundary proposal from coexisting with Christian belief. That the universe is ultimately governed by the laws of nature, and that science has the ability to fully fathom the workings of the cosmos are two decisions which, as seen above, ultimately bring the no-boundary proposal into conflict with the doctrine of creation. The choices made by Hawking and his fellow cosmologists in interpreting the cosmos around them are different than those made by Christians who attempt such interpretation based on the doctrine of creation. Hawking chooses to place his trust in the tools of human rationality and science alone, while others choose to trust the tools of faith and theology. It would be a mistake to underestimate the width of the gap separating the two perspectives. **PTR**

¹⁴Ibid., 128.

¹⁵Ibid., 98.

¹⁶Migliore, 90.

¹⁷Hawking, 1993, 98.

¹⁸Ibid., 98.

¹⁹Ibid., 99.

Betsey Stockton

Pioneer American Missionary

EILEEN F. MOFFETT

Born to a slave mother about 1798 in Princeton, New Jersey, Betsey Stockton was the first unmarried woman missionary ever sent by a North American mission agency beyond the borders of the United States.¹ She went to the Sandwich Islands back in 1822 while John Adams was president of this young Republic.²

We know little about Betsey's family except that her mother was owned by Robert Stockton, one of Princeton's distinguished citizens whose home was *Constitution Hill*. Robert was a cousin of Richard Stockton, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and both of them were grandsons of one of the original pioneer settlers of the town. There is no record of Betsey's father, and it seems likely that she never knew who he was, though either her father or grandfather was probably a white man, since in her will she describes herself as a "mulatto."

But her story, even with some pieces lost, is particularly fascinating because of its precedent-breaking character. A black, a slave, a woman, and the first single woman missionary from North America.

When Betsey was a small child Robert Stockton gave her as a little servant girl to his oldest daughter, Elizabeth,

who was the wife of a Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia named Ashbel Green. The Greens had three sons, Robert, Jacob and James. James, the youngest, was six years old when, back in Princeton on his grandfather Stockton's farm, the little slave girl, Betsey Stockton, was born.

Much later, Dr. Green, in a letter of recommendation for Betsey, supporting her application as a missionary candidate, wrote: "By me and my wife she was never intended to be held as a slave."³ Dr. Green was a strong anti-slavery advocate of his day, as was his Presbyterian minister father before him. Green's letter continued:

We deliberated seriously on the subject of dedicating her to God in baptism. But on the whole concluded not to do it. Betsey gave no evidence of piety, or of any permanent seriousness till she was near twenty years old. On the contrary, she was, at least till the age of thirteen or fourteen, wild and thoughtless, if not vicious. She always, however, manifested a great degree of natural sensibility, and of attachment to me and to her first mistress; and a great aptitude for mental improvement.⁴

So we know that Elizabeth and Ashbel Green had discussed the question of her baptism. There was, however, some ambiguity in Presbyterian Church law as to whether believing masters and mistresses who had slave children under their care, should see it as their duty and responsibility to baptize them and oversee their Christian nurture—or whether such children might be presented only by believing parents.⁵ For whatever reason, the Greens decided not to sponsor her baptism, even though they took seriously their responsibility to instruct and nurture her and their other domestics in Christian faith and life.⁶

Eileen F. Moffett is a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and a former missionary to Korea, with the Presbyterian Church (USA). She lives with her husband, Samuel H. Moffett, in Princeton, New Jersey.

This article is reprinted with permission from the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*

¹A widow, Mrs. Charlotte White, was appointed a few years earlier by the recently-formed Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, to go to Burma. But on the journey to her field she met and married an English missionary in India and remained there with him. There had also been unknown Moravian girls sent abroad to marry men already on the field. [From R. Pierce Beaver, *American Protestant Women in World Mission* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, Revised ed. 1980): pp. 63-66.]

²It is frustrating at times groping through the shadowy details of Betsey Stockton's life because there are so many clues missing. One researcher wrote, "It's like trying to read a book when some of the pages are torn out, or trying to sing a song when some of the words are forgotten." Article by Carol Santoki Dodd, "Betsey Stockton: A History Student's Perspective," published in *Educational Perspectives, Journal of the College of Education*, University of Hawaii, 16, no. 1 (March 1977): pp. 10-15.

³Letter of Ashbel Green to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Princeton, NJ, September 3, 1821, ABCFM archives, vol. 4, #210.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Boston Recorder*, Friday, May 6, 1836, Article on the Baptism of slave children (taken from the *Journal and Luminary*).

⁶Jones, Joseph H., D.D., Editor, *The Life of Ashbel Green, V.D.M.*, Begun to be written by himself in his eighty-second year and continued to his eighty-fourth., (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, No. 285 Broadway, 1849). (In an appended memoir, appearing as Chap. XXIX, written by his Philadelphia

Of Betsey's growing-up years we have only snatches of information. We know that she was precocious and by Dr. Green's account, became alarmingly wild and wilful. She was treated in their household kindly as a little servant girl, and one for whom they had a growing affection. She was systematically tutored in the academic and spiritual disciplines given their own children.

Elizabeth Stockton Green died in 1807, when Betsey was about nine years old. Betsey stayed on with the family for all but three or four of her childhood and early teen-age years. She was included in family prayers and "home-schooled" by Dr. Green, who often heard her catechism lessons, and by his son, James, who took a particular interest in her education. She developed a sisterly affection for James and his older brother, Jacob, and later in Hawaii took pains to collect and send home to Jacob from the island of Maui a number of interesting and unusual specimens of seashells and insects for his scientific research. Betsey showed a great aptitude for learning, although she never had a day of formal schooling in her life. Dr. Green had an extensive library in his home and the young girl made the most of it.

The family moved to Princeton in 1812 when Ashbel Green took up duties as the eighth president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). He had married a second time in 1809 and was the father of another baby son, Ashbel, Jr. Betsey was away from their household at the time of the move back to Princeton but returned after three or four years. She had been living in the family of Dr. Green's niece in Woodbury, New Jersey because of Green's worries about the unhealthy influences of Philadelphia city life on this impressionable young girl.

During the winter term of 1814-1815 at the college in Princeton a remarkable and spontaneous "revival of religion" took place under Dr. Green's tenure. As well as reinstating the study of Latin and Greek into the curriculum, Green had organized a College Bible Society and offered regular instruction in the sacred scriptures, examining the students, himself, on their knowledge of the Bible. Each Sabbath day the young men of the college and of the theological seminary next door gathered together at Nassau Hall for worship. When the revival broke out in early 1815 the atmosphere of community life among the students was greatly affected for good and this eventually spilled over into Betsey's life. She attributes her conversion, though, to the ministry of a seminary student, Eliphalet Wheeler Gilbert, over a year later, in the summer of 1816, while sitting in the gallery of Princeton's First Presbyterian (now Nassau) Church.

The session minutes of that congregation record that on September 20, 1816, "Betsey Stockton, a coloured woman living in the family of the Rev. Dr. Green, applied for admission to the Lord's table." The session was satisfied as to the evidence of what they called her "experimental acquaintance with religion" and her good conduct, and agreed to receive her into full communicant membership.⁷ She was

colleague, Rev. Dr. J. Janeway, p. 572.

⁷Session Minutes, Princeton, NJ, First Presbyterian Church, September 20, 1816. Archives of Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ.

publicly baptized at that time and admitted to the Lord's table. It was sometime either that year or within the next two years that she was legally manumitted by Dr. Green.

Betsey's Growing Interest in Mission

Betsey's maturing Christian faith gradually gave form in her mind to a sense of the duty which Christians bear toward the "lost" of the world. This was a clear reflection of the American evangelical faith of her times represented by Dr. Green, by the seminary students who were her Bible teachers, and by her own pastor in the First Presbyterian Church in Princeton. All of them shared this Christian worldview which was grounded on the premise of the love of God in Jesus Christ for the whole world—and the conviction that salvation is found only in Christ. Betsey believed with all her heart that it is the sacred duty of Christians to offer themselves in humble obedience to God's call to carry out his plan of salvation through Jesus Christ for the world.⁸ This persuasion soon blossomed into a desire to go to Africa as a missionary. Some of her friends opposed her plan but she continued to read and study, hoping for such an opportunity.

During this time she started a little class of instruction for several black children of the Princeton community. And for about a year and a half she was a member of a Sabbath-school class taught by a seminary student, Michael Osborn. Osborn was impressed by her serious scholarship. When eventually called upon for a letter of recommendation, he wrote: "She has a larger acquaintance with sacred history and the Mosaic Institutions than almost any ordinary person, old or young, I have ever known . . ." (He explained that by "ordinary" he meant one not a member of the clergy or a candidate for the ministry.) Osborn went on to say: "I recollect a multitude of instances where, for my own information, I have questioned her about some fact in Biblical history, or some minute point in Jewish antiquities, and have immediately received a correct answer."⁹

Dr. Green was not among those who tried to discourage Betsey's missionary ambitions, although he must have wondered what opportunity she might ever have for such a commission, particularly as a single woman.

American Protestants were not yet ready to send single women overseas without a protector. There were all kinds of problems to overcome in even considering such a radical step. For one thing there was the danger that a single woman, who would, of course, be expected to live in a mar-

⁸Corr, Donald Philip, *The Field is the World—Proclaiming, Translating and Serving By the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions 1810-40*, a dissertation submitted to the Center for Advanced Theological Studies of Fuller Theological Seminary for Review by the External Reader, 1993, p. 27 (in a general discussion of the principal motivating factors of ABCFM board administrators, missionaries and supporters between 1810 and 1840).

⁹Letter of Michael Osborn to Jeremiah Evarts, Corresponding Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Princeton, NJ, October 27, 1821, archives of the ABCFM, Vol. 4, #209.

ried missionary's home, might be imposed upon to act as little more than a domestic servant or built-in baby sitter. And there was also the risk that the people among whom they worked would assume that the male missionary kept two wives.¹⁰

Betsey Stockton and a Princeton Seminary student, Charles Stewart, had been acquainted for several years since he had been in and out of the Greens' home often from his earliest days as a college student. Stewart had been one of those converted during the period of spiritual awakening among the students in 1815 and he attributed to Dr. Green's preaching and counsel the first effectual turning of his heart to the Lord and to a missionary purpose.

When Betsey learned that this young friend and his bride-to-be were going out as missionaries to the Sandwich Islands her heart must have skipped a beat in thinking whether it might be possible for her to accompany them. She was well trained in domestic concerns, had skills as a nurse through useful life experience, and was also well prepared as a teacher, though without a day of public instruction in her life, apart from that received at home and church. But the possibility of her accompanying the Stewarts as a missionary must have seemed at first preposterous.

Nevertheless, on September 3, 1821, Dr. Ashbel Green wrote a letter to the Secretary of the *American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* recommending Charles Stewart as a missionary candidate and, as he noted in his diary, another "one for my Betty."¹¹ "She had saved her wages," he said, "by which, with some small assistance from myself, she was able to prepare her outfit for the mission."¹²

We can only guess at the negotiations that had been taking place in designing the innovative plan which resulted in her trail-blazing appointment. While the "mission family" concept wasn't guaranteed to forestall a possible misunderstanding about a missionary keeping two wives, it did at least provide protection and security for a single woman. The arrangement agreed upon was that Betsey would become part of Charles and Harriet Stewart's family.

Stewart had graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1821 and was married in June of 1822. Five months later, on Nov. 19th that same year, the Stewarts and Betsey, bound as a family in this unique but happy association, joined the little band of eleven other missionaries and four native islanders leaving American shores to go as the first reinforcements to the Sandwich Islands mission established by its pioneers three years earlier. These islands, which we now call *Hawaii* were discovered by Captain James Cook in 1778 and named for the Earl of Sandwich, who had invented one of the most enduring fast foods of the Western world. The mission was under the direction of the *American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* with headquarters in

Boston. This Board, known as the ABCFM, was the joint missionary agency of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches in America at that time.

It was still true then and for quite a while longer, that only the ordained men had a vote in the mission and were officially appointed "missionaries." Wives and single women were "assistant missionaries," without vote. But it is only fair to say that the same was true for a time, of unordained men such as physicians and printers. And one of the reasons for that was undoubtedly the fact that American evangelical Christians between 1810 and 1840 considered the proclamation (i.e. "preaching") of the Gospel to be the highest priority in missions. Wives, teachers, physicians and other workers were important partners to the preachers, but in a secondary role.¹³ It was the preachers who most unequivocally bore the name "missionary." So, it was as a member of a "mission family" that Betsey's dream of becoming a missionary, even an "assistant missionary," was worked out.

Betsey's appointment was carefully worded to define her status: The official document, still in the ABCFM archives, spelled out the essentials of this unusual appointment in writing. Among other stipulations, it read: "She is to be regarded and treated, neither as an equal nor as a servant, but as a humble Christian friend."¹⁴ The wording may have been a bit ambiguous but not paralyzingly so. And by this distinctive appointment Betsey Stockton became a missionary.

In the first letter that Betsey wrote home to Dr. Green during the long 5-month voyage she confessed to

the most death-like sickness I ever felt in my life, occasioned by the motion of the ship. Every person in the mission, except Mr. Stuart and Kermoola (one of the returning islanders), was sick at the same time. The weather became very boisterous . . . I am happy to tell you that since I left home, in all the storms and dangers I have been called to witness, I have never lost my self-possession. This I consider as a fulfillment of the promise that as my day is, so my strength shall be. But we have not yet come to the most trying part of the voyage. We are now near the coast of Africa, and I fear I shall not act the Christian, in the thunder storms which are to be expected there.

She continued:

I wish it was in my power to give the ladies of your family some account of our manner of living . . . sometimes in imagination, I visit them in the night, and get a piece of bread; for there is nothing I have wanted so much since I left home, of the provision kind, as bread. Ours is pilot-bread and crackers, and by using them in our seasickness I took a dislike to them. But we have pudding, boiled rice, and mush once a week, and beans, pota-

¹⁰See discussion of this problem in R.Pierce Beaver, *American Protestant Women in World Mission* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI; Revised edition 1980), p. 62.

¹¹Notes from the diary of Ashbel Green, 1821, September 3, 1821, Princeton University Rare Books and Archives, Princeton, N.J.

¹³Corr, Donald Philip, *The Field is the World—Proclaiming, Translating, and Serving By the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions 1810-40*, p. 3.

toes, boiled onions, fruit, etc. The cook, however, is a dirty man, and we are obliged to eat without asking questions. While I was sick, they gave me a mug of chicken soup—the grease, the pepper, and the feathers, floated together on the surface.

She went on to describe their sleeping arrangements and how her hammock pitched and rolled.

Whenever my head went to leeward and my feet to windward, which was the case every five minutes, it made me very sick . . . The second night the ship rolled without pitching, and I was thrown back and forth as fast as I could go, until about 12 o'clock at night, when . . . I was thrown up, first against the ceiling and then on the dining table . . . The water running on the deck, and the trunks falling in the cabin, allowed me to think very little of myself.¹⁵

Later on a calmer day she wrote in her journal, "If it were in my power I would like to describe the phosphorescence of the sea. But to do this would require the pen of a Milton: and he, I think, would fail, were he to attempt it . . ."¹⁶

Finally the long five-month voyage ended and their schooner pulled into the harbor at Honolulu. Betsey described her feelings at the first sight of the native islanders who came out to welcome them in little canoes as a chilling effect. "They were mostly naked except for a narrow strip of *tapa* around their loins. When they first came on board, the ladies retired to the cabin and burst into tears; and some of the gentlemen turned pale . . ." ". . . my own soul sickened within me, and every nerve trembled. Are these, thought I, the beings with whom I must spend the remainder of my life? They are men and have souls—was the reply which conscience made . . . We informed them that we were missionaries, come to live with them and do them good. At which an old man exclaimed, in his native dialect, ' . . . That is very good. By and by know God . . . ' " Betsey went on to say: "in a short time our unpleasant feelings were much dissipated."¹⁷ One morning a few days after they landed the queen spoke to a messenger asking solicitously, "Have they hog still?" "Yes," he answered. "Any dog?" "No eat dog." "Any potatoes?" "No." "Any melons?" "No." On which an order was immediately given, and two men were despatched with potatoes and melons for the missionaries. "In fact," they wrote, "no Christian congregation in America could, in this respect, have received a clergyman, coming to administer the word of life to them, with greater hospitality, or stronger expressions of love and good will."¹⁸

After about a month at the mission base in Honolulu, Betsey Stockton and her family, Charles and Harriet Stewart, together with Mr. and Mrs. Richards, were sent to open a new mission station on the island of Maui at a place called *Lahaina*. There was by then a baby with them, also, little Charles Stewart, who had been born on board ship just before they landed in Honolulu.

Betsey was greatly skilled in all matters related to caring for a household including care of the sick, which was providential, since Harriet Stewart was quite ill for weeks at a time during their residence in the islands. This valuable

friend and companion threw herself into the concerns of the Stewart family and the small mission station at Lahaina. But perhaps her most notable contribution as a missionary assistant in the Sandwich Islands was as a teacher. It is significant that she helped to organize and was put in charge of the first school on the islands open to commoners—predominantly farmers. She wrote to Ashbel Green in 1824: "I have now a fine school of the . . . lower class of people, the first, I believe, that has ever been established . . ."¹⁹ Charles Stewart wrote that these common folk had made application for books and slates and a teacher. So, beginning with about thirty individuals, this school was formed in the chapel, meeting every afternoon under the superintendence of Betsey, who, he said, "is quite familiar with the native tongue." Other missionaries had established the first schools in the islands, usually attended by the upper classes. Betsey, the former slave, was the first to organize a school for the disadvantaged.

Return to New Service in America

After only two and a half years in Hawaii Mrs. Stewart became so ill that their whole family, including a new little daughter born to the Stewarts during that time, found it necessary to return to America. Betsey chose to leave with them. They were offered a gratuitous passage to England by Captain Dale of the English whaleship *Fawn*. After a six-month voyage, from October 15, 1825 until April, 1826, they arrived at the English port of Gravesend and following a layover of several months in London, continued the return journey to America, arriving at New York in August.²⁰ Although her ministry in the Sandwich Islands was relatively brief, her missionary impulses never diminished to the end of her life.

Following her return from the Sandwich Islands Betsey kept an infant school for black children for a while in Philadelphia. But because of Harriet Stewart's continuing frail health, she stood ready and went on a number of occasions to help care for Harriet and the children. Charles Stewart had been forced to resign his missionary commission because of his wife's health and had joined the Navy chaplaincy. Betsey was with Harriet and the children in Cooperstown, New York during the winter of 1826 and probably through most of 1827.²¹ For four months during the summer of 1827 their "Aunt Betsey" and the children were in Albany, New York while Mrs. Stewart was away travelling with her husband.²²

Some time in the summer or autumn of 1829 a Me-

²⁰ Joseph Tracy and others, *History of American Missions to the Heathen, from their Commencement to the Present Time* (Worcester: Spooner & Howland, 1840), p. 153.

²¹ Letter from Harriet Bradford Tiffany Stewart to Miss Olivia Murray, Barclay St., NY, March 21, 1827, (among the Chas. Stewart papers in the James Fennimore Cooper library, Cooperstown, NY.)

²² Letter to Levi Chamberlain, Island of Oahu, Sandwich Islands, from Rev. Charles S. Stewart, October 29, 1827. Letter in the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library, Honolulu, Hawaii.

thodist missionary, Mr. William Case, traveled to Philadelphia, where Betsey was living again, with the purpose of trying to persuade the young woman to answer another missionary call and go with him to organize schools and instruct native Indian children at Grape Island across the border in Canada, near upstate New York.²³ She went for a few months and on her return brought a birchbark canoe—about three or four feet long to little Charles Stewart, then about 6 years old. The family was in New Haven that year, staying with Harriet's "adopted" father while Charles Stewart was away with his ship.²⁴

When Harriet Stewart died in 1830 just four years after they had returned from Hawaii, "Aunt Betsey," answered a call again and went to Cooperstown, New York to care for the (by now) three motherless children. Their father soon had to leave again, as he so often did for long stretches of time when his ship was away at sea.

In 1833 Betsey decided to move the children and herself back to Princeton, even though Dr. Green and his household had been living again in Philadelphia for the past eleven years. James Green, her childhood family tutor, had married and established a notable law practice in Princeton. So Betsey undoubtedly had his family to help her re-locate to the town she thought of as home, though under very changed circumstances. She enrolled young Charles, then about eleven years old, in the "Edgehill School" on Hibben Road.

Charles Stewart, the children's father, re-married in 1835 and they went back with him to New York. But Betsey stayed on in Princeton. She was truly alone for the first time in her life, and had some depressing bouts of illness. It was a very distressing time for her. Should she go back into domestic service to earn her living? Where was her family? And who was her family? After a while she moved beyond the time of gloomy loneliness and anxiety over her future and succeeded in opening a public or "common" school for black children which she served with great distinction for many years as principal.

During the time of her early years back in Princeton there was some racial tension at the First Presbyterian Church, Betsey's home church. In the mid-1830's an opportunity arose for the black members of the church to separate and form their own congregation a few blocks away. And Betsey Stockton's name heads the list of the founding members of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church of Princeton. She helped to found a Sabbath School for children and young people in connection with the church and was its most faithful teacher for twenty-five or thirty years. Providentially, the records of this school for about a ten-year period have been preserved and are now lodged in the Rare Books and archives section of Princeton University's Fire-

stone Library. Among the early superintendents, most of whom were drawn from among students at the Theological Seminary, was John L. Nevius, later of China missionary fame, known widely for his *Nevius Method* of missionary strategy, so successfully used in Korea and often referred to as the *Three-Self Movement*.

Mr. Nevius, in a letter to his future wife, wrote from Princeton in 1852, "Mr. Williams (a fellow seminary student), of whom I have spoken to you, intends going with his wife to the island of Corisco, Africa, and thinks of taking with him a negress named Aunt Betsy, and all my . . . Sunday-School class!"²⁵ It was probably wishful thinking but indicated the high regard in which he held them.

She also persuaded a student at the Theological Seminary in Princeton, the Rev. Lewis W. Mudge, to open a night school for young black men and women who were employed during the day. According to Constance Escher, a Princeton teacher and writer, "[Betsey] Stockton used to read Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* in Latin with Mudge."²⁶

"Aunt Betsey" grew to be one of Princeton's most admired and beloved figures, though unassuming and gentle in spirit. She had a quiet, steady Christian influence, particularly on young people, with whom she was always surrounded in week-day school and in Sunday school.

Escher mentions that "one of the first women teachers at the [Witherspoon Street] Sabbath School, Cecilia Van Tyne, went to Rio de Janeiro in 1848 as a missionary." It isn't hard to trace the influence of Betsey Stockton in the life of this young woman.

The three Stewart children were very close to her heart. Young Charles, who was nurtured and trained by "Aunt Betsey" from the moment of his birth until the time of her death, and was as close as she ever got to having a son of her own, graduated with highest honors at the head of his class in the military academy at West Point and went on to a distinguished career as a Brigadier General. The children, for their part, loved her dearly. And when she died in 1865, a few months after President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, her funeral was conducted by the President of Princeton college, Dr. John Maclean, who preached the sermon; by Professor Duffield, of Nassau Hall; and by Dr. Charles Hodge, Senior Professor of the Theological Seminary at Princeton. She was lovingly laid to rest in beautiful Lakewood cemetery in Cooperstown, NY overlooking Lake Otsego, beside the rest of her Stewart family, some of whom died before she did, and some after.

Betsey Stockton was a remarkable 19th-century woman missionary pioneer. She must have faced what many today would call daunting identity problems. She was obviously marginalized, often lonely, perhaps feeling that she did not completely belong to anyone or any place. She might well have carried a burden of resentment. But that is a costly burden to bear, too costly for Betsey. Instead, like a much earlier missionary pioneer, she discovered a secret which became her victory over loneliness and despair. St. Paul described it as being "in Christ." Betsey learned that secret, too, through a lifetime of walking with her Lord. She learned the happy secret that "in Christ" one does not live altogether "under the circumstances," whatever they may be.

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²⁴The information that it was on Grape Island where Betsey Stockton served comes from an article written by Constance K. Escher, "She Calls Herself Betsey Stockton," *Princeton History*, 10 (1991): p. 87.

²⁵Letter of Gen. Charles Seaforth Stewart to Miss Martha A. Chamberlain, Corr. Sec'y of the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society, Honolulu, HI, October 26, 1899, written from Cooperstown, N.Y.

Jonathan Edwards and the 'Author of Sin' Charge

JOHN KEARNEY

In a 1994 article entitled "Anti-Social Determinism," the British philosopher Antony Flew writes:

Typically Christians think of the relations between the Creator and the Creator's human creatures on the model of those between a human father and his children. And, of course, it is only in certain scandalous and extremely exceptional cases that parents can properly be held responsible for the misdeeds of their grown up children; and then, even in those rare cases, only partially and rather remotely. But in this aspect, which is here crucial, that preferred model is totally inapplicable. For if we were indeed creatures of a Creator in any Judaeo-Christian or Islamic understanding, then, as the ultimate sustaining cause of everything which exists or happens within the supposedly created Universe, God must necessarily make us the various individual people who, confronted inescapably with choices to be made, do in fact choose as we do choose. Such a God must therefore . . . be the ultimate responsible necessitating cause of everything; and everything means everything, including all those sins for which unforgiven sinners are to be punished with extremes of unending torture.¹

Flew believes that it is not only the Calvinists who make God ultimately responsible for human sinful choices, but "it is also acknowledged to be an inescapable implication of theism in the Mosaic tradition of Aquinas, Luther and other classical theologians."²

Flew's objection to Christianity is not new. The same charge was made by Arminians in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries against the Calvinist theological scheme. In Part IV, Section 9 of *Freedom of the Will* Jonathan Edwards states the fundamental Arminian objection.

'Tis urged by Arminians, that the doctrine of the

necessity of men's volitions, or their necessary connection with antecedent events and circumstances, makes the first cause, and supreme orderer of all things, the author of sin; in that he has so constituted the state and course of things, that sinful volitions become necessary, in consequence of his disposal.³

Edwards clearly believes in "the doctrine of the necessity of men's volitions."⁴ He also believes that God is the "first cause" and "supreme orderer of all things." However, it is equally clear that he does not think that these beliefs entail that God is "the author of sin," in the sense of being the *efficient cause* of sin. The purpose of this paper is (1) to analyze and evaluate Edwards's replies to the standard Arminian "author of sin" charge, and (2) probe the sense in which, according to Edwards, God can be causally responsible for sin without being morally responsible for sin. I believe Edwards has coherent and persuasive replies not just to his Arminian counterparts, but to the wider philosophical audience as well (including philosophers like Flew).

Edwards's Replies To The "Author of Sin" Charge

In *Freedom of the Will* Edwards addresses the "author of sin" charge by refuting claims made by the Anglican divine Daniel Whitby in his *Discourse on the Five Points*.⁵

³ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, edited by Paul Ramsey, Volume I of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 397. Hereafter, I will employ *FW* and the page number parenthetically when citing passages from *Freedom of the Will*.

⁴ Edwards believes that human volitions are (i) caused or determined by the strongest motive, (ii) foreknown by God, and (iii) decreed by God. What is caused is necessary, i.e., inevitable and certain to occur; the same is true of what God foreknows and decrees.

⁵ Edwards abbreviates the title of Whitby's *Discourse*. The actual title is *A Discourse Concerning I. The True Import of the Words Election and Reprobation; and the Things Signified by Them in the Holy Scripture. II. The Extent of Christ's Redemption. III. The Grace of God; Where It Is Enquired, Whether It Be Vouchsafed Sufficiently to Those Who Improve It Not, and Irresistibly to Those Who Do Not Improve It; and*

John Kearney is Associate Professor of Philosophy at St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia.

¹ Antony Flew, "Social Anti-Determinism," *Philosophy* 69 (1944): pp. 29-30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Whitby asserts that the doctrine of the necessity of human volitions "absolves sinners, as doing nothing of their own accord which was evil, and would cast all the blame of all the wickedness committed in the world, upon God, and upon his providence . . ."⁶ Whitby also attacks the doctrine by appealing to the principle, "*causa deficiens, in rebus necessariis, ad causam per se efficientem reducenda est*. In things necessary, the deficient cause must be reduced to the efficient." (FW, 397) God is the "deficient cause" who withholds the assistance necessary to the avoidance or prevention of sin. This reduces God, Whitby thinks, to the status of an "efficient cause" or "author of sin."

Edwards has four replies to Whitby's objections.

(i) His first reply makes use of *tu quoque* arguments. If God is the author of sin because He withholds the assistance necessary to avoid or prevent human sin, then the same must be said of Whitby's own position as regards "the great pride of the devils, and of their perfect malignity against God, Christ, his saints, and all that is good, and of the insatiable cruelty of their disposition." (FW, 398) By Whitby's own admission God has forsaken the devils. He has so withheld "his assistance from them, that they are incapacitated from doing good, and determined only to evil." (FW, 398) If the doctrine of the necessity of human volitions makes God the author or efficient cause of human sin, then Whitby's own doctrine makes God the author or efficient cause of the sin of the devils.

In addition, if God's foreknowledge of human sin entails that God is the author of sin, then "this is a difficulty which equally attends the doctrine of the Arminians themselves; at least those of them who allow God's certain foreknowledge of all events." (FW, 398) The Arminians clearly believe that if God foreknew that Judas would betray Jesus, then it certainly and infallibly follows that Judas would betray Jesus. If divine foreknowledge entails that God is the "author of sin" on Edwards's scheme, the same holds true for the Arminian scheme.

It is important to note that Edwards's *tu quoque* arguments do not prove that God is *not* the author or efficient cause of sin. Their sole purpose is to expose inconsistencies in the Arminian objection. Edwards is simply saying to Whitby and his fellow Arminians: "You are being inconsistent when you charge that my position entails X when your own position entails X." This is a very common procedure in Edwards's writings, especially when he is refuting the Arminians. He often points out that Arminian objections to his own position are, in fact, objections that can be levelled at their own scheme.

(ii) In his second reply Edwards claims that those who charge God with being the "author of sin" should spell out what they mean by "author of sin." Edwards notes two

senses of the phrase.

If by "author of sin," be meant the sinner, the agent, or actor of sin, or the *doer* of a wicked thing; so it would be a reproach and blasphemy, to suppose God to be the author of sin. In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the author of sin . . . and deny any such thing to be the consequence of what I have laid down. (FW, 399)

Human beings themselves are the *agents* or *doers* of sin in Edwards's view. If I injure my neighbor's reputation through a lie, it is *I* who sin, not God. The act of lying is performed by *me*. I am the agent who authors the lie.

Edwards also notes a second sense of "author of sin" which does apply to God (although he dislikes the phrase "author of sin" because of the obvious pejorative connotation). God can be said to be the "author of sin" insofar as He "permits" sin and does not "hinder" its occurrence. God is the "disposer and orderer" of sin but always, Edwards adds, for "wise, holy, and most excellent ends and purposes." (FW, 399)

Edwards cites numerous examples from Scripture which involve this second sense of "author of sin." For example, when God permitted Jesus to be crucified He did not intervene to prevent this event from happening. He did not hinder its occurrence. Indeed, God ordered this event, as He orders all things in his providence. And though the crucifixion of Christ was "one of the most heinous things that ever was done; in many respects the most horrid of all acts," yet "as it was willed and ordered of God, in the extent of his designs and views, it was the most admirable and glorious of all events." (FW, 406) Edwards makes a similar point about Christ's crucifixion in his treatise, *Miscellaneous Observations Concerning The Divine Decrees In General, and Election In Particular*.

Evil is an evil thing, and yet it may be a good thing that evil should be in the world. There is certainly a difference between the thing itself existing, and its being an evil thing that ever it came into existence. As, for instance, it might be an evil thing to crucify Christ, but yet it was a good thing that the crucifying of Christ came to pass. As men's act, it was evil but as God ordered it, it was good. Who will deny but that it may be so that evil's coming to pass may be an occasion of a greater good than that it is an evil and so of their being more good in the whole, than if that evil had not come to pass? And if so, then it is a good thing that evil comes to pass.⁷

In itself Christ's crucifixion was an evil thing, innocent as he was of any wrongdoing. But in the larger scheme of things, from the point of view of God's overall designs and purposes, it was a good thing. There was "more good in the

Whether Men Be Wholly Passive in the Work of Their Regeneration? IV. The Liberty of the Will in a State of Trial and Probation. V. The Perseverance or Defectibility of the Saints; with Some Reflections on the State of Heathens, the Providence and Prescience of God (first published in 1710). Edwards's citations are from the second edition of 1735.

⁶ Whitby, *Discourse on the Five Points*, Dis., VI, Ch. 1, no. 4, p. 486.

⁷ *Miscellaneous Observations On The Decrees In General, And Election In Particular*, in *The Works of President Edwards*, Vol. II (New York: Robert Carter And Brothers, 1881), pp. 519-520. Hereafter cited as *Miscellaneous Observations*.

whole" because Christ was crucified than if he had not been crucified. Edwards concludes his second reply by claiming that the Arminians must also grant that God permits sin, that He does not hinder it, and that He orders it in accordance with his providence. If there is any difficulty in speaking of God as the "author of sin" in this sense, then the Arminian position labors under an equal difficulty.

(iii) In his third reply to Whitby Edwards attempts a defense of the distinction between the two senses of "author of sin." It is one thing for God to *permit* sin by not hindering its occurrence, quite another for God to *produce* sin. God does the former, but not the latter. Thus, there is a difference between his being "the *orderer* of its certain existence, by *not hindering* it, under certain circumstances, and his being the proper *actor* or *author* of it, by a *positive agency* or *efficiency*." (FW, 403)

Whitby disagrees. He supposes that "if sin necessarily follows from God's withholding assistance, or if that assistance be not given which is absolutely necessary to the avoiding of evil; then in the nature of the thing, God must be as properly the author of that evil, as if He were the efficient cause of it." (FW, 397-398) If "sinful volitions" are necessary (since foreknown and ordered by God), and God permits them by withholding his assistance and not preventing them, then it's as if God caused these volitions to occur in the first place.

In defense of his position Whitby invokes the axiom, "in things necessary, the deficient cause must be reduced to the efficient." A deficient cause causes by *not doing* something, for example, by not giving assistance in the prevention of an evil. For example, if I have been seriously injured in an accident and a paramedic has the power and opportunity to prevent me from dying by administering CPR, yet refuses to administer CPR, then the paramedic is a "deficient cause." If we assume that my death is necessary (inevitable, certain to occur) if he fails to administer CPR, and I die as a result of his inaction, then it's as if the paramedic killed me himself. The deficient cause becomes the efficient cause, i.e., the cause that produces or brings about my death.

Edwards, however, rejects the axiom, "in things necessary, the deficient cause must be reduced to the efficient." I think Edwards would agree that the paramedic is morally responsible for my death. However, in God's case, *causing* sin (in the sense of producing it) and *permitting* sin (by not hindering its occurrence) are not the same thing. Edwards defends the distinction by way of an analogy with the sun. When the sun is present it is the cause of "the lightness and warmth of the atmosphere," and the "brightness of gold and diamonds." (FW, 404) But the absence of the sun is not, in the same sense,⁸ the cause "of darkness and frost, in the night." (FW, 404). If the sun were a cause in the sense of positively influencing or producing cold and darkness, then the sun itself would have to be "dark and cold," with beams that are "black and frosty." (FW, 404) There must be at least as much reality in the efficient cause as there is in

the effect. The sun, by its departure from the horizon, is a cause in the sense of an antecedent occasion, but it is not an efficient cause of darkness and frost. The sun's absence does not *produce* darkness and frost. Analogously, God's permitting sin (by not hindering it) is the ultimate *occasion* of

In God's case, causing sin (in the sense of producing it) and permitting sin (by not hindering its occurrence) are not the same thing. God's permitting sin is the ultimate occasion of human sin, but this does not make God the efficient cause of human sin anymore than the departure of the sun makes the sun the efficient cause of cold and darkness.

human sin, but this does not make God the efficient cause of human sin anymore than the departure of the sun makes the sun the efficient cause of cold and darkness.

It would be strange arguing indeed, because men never commit sin, but only when God leaves 'em to themselves, and necessarily sin, when he does so, that therefore their sin is not *from themselves*, but from God; and so, that God must be a sinful being: as strange as it would be to argue, because it is always dark when the sun is gone, and never dark when the sun is present, that therefore all darkness is from the sun (FW, 404)

Fifteen years after his death Edwards's distinction between permitting sin and producing sin came under attack by James Dana, Bishop of Wallingford, Connecticut, in his scathing critique of *Freedom of the Will*. Dana thinks that the language Edwards employs to describe the workings of divine providence clearly suggests that God is the efficient cause of sin. How can Edwards maintain that sin arises from a lack of influence on God's part while at the same time claim that God is "the *determiner*, *orderer*, and *decisive disposer* of this event?"⁹ Edwards cannot consistently maintain that God merely permits sin, or does not hinder sin, and yet disposes or orders events in such a manner that sin inevitably follows.

Is God's *determining*, *ordering* and *actually disposing* things in his providence, in a *decisive* manner, a mere negative? Doth not this ordering and disposing an event, with all the previous circumstances, imply something more than *forebearing* to act?

⁸ It is important to note that Edwards has a very broad notion of causation. Sometimes "cause" means efficient cause, sometimes "cause" means an antecedent ground or reason (what Edwards commonly refers to as an *occasion*). See FW, 180-181.

⁹ James Dana, D.D., *The "Examination Of The Late Rev'd President Edwards's Enquiry on Freedom of Will, Continued"* (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1773), p. 59.

even his influence and energy, or active providence therein? Are the *determinations* and *decrees* of God, the *dispositions* of his providence, nothing *positive*? Mr. Edwards saith expressly, "To *direct*, *decide*, or *determine* any thing is to act." He connects the *active* and *permissive* providence of God—maintains an *efficient* determination of, and *efficacious* providence in sin.¹⁰

When God withholds his influence He acts in a negative manner; when He *determines*, *orders*, or *disposes* He acts in a positive manner. Thus, God cannot be acting in a mere negative manner when He *determines* or *orders* sin's occurrence. When Dana quotes Edwards as saying that "to *direct*, *decide*, or *determine* any thing, is to act" (the quotation is from *Freedom of the Will*) he seems to be saying that *determining*, *ordering*, and *disposing* are all acts of commission.

In defense of Edwards, however, it seems that one can passively direct, decide, or determine an event by an act of omission. For example, a doctor may not operate on a patient suffering from a disease if he thinks the surgery will kill the patient. He may know that the patient will inevitably die from the disease but that if he does not operate the patient will live longer. Has not the doctor, by his decision not to operate, directed and determined the patient's fate? Indeed, it seems that the doctor has directed, decided, and determined that the patient's life be prolonged and that the patient die from the disease, not from the surgery. More generally, if there is no inherent inconsistency between directing, deciding, or determining a certain state of affairs and simply withholding assistance, then there is no inconsistency involved in God's directing, deciding, or determining that sin will occur and His permitting it by withholding his assistance.

Dana has other difficulties with Edwards's position. If God is not the efficient cause of sin, it follows "that the sinful being himself must be this cause."¹¹ But if a human being is the efficient cause of sin, then a human being has the power of self-determination, "contrary to the principle design of Mr. Edwards's book."¹² Edwards goes to great lengths in *Freedom of the Will* to refute the Arminian claim that the will has the power of self-determination. Thus, the following disjunctive argument arises for Dana: Either God is the efficient cause of sin, or a human being is the efficient cause of sin, or sin has no cause. But a human being cannot be the efficient cause of sin (as this would entail having the power of self-determination), nor can sin be without a cause (since nothing occurs by chance). Therefore, God is the efficient cause of sin. Granting that sin must have a cause Edwards "must either maintain the positive action and energy of the deity in the introduction of sin into the world, or else admit that it arose from a cause in the mind of the sinner—in other words that he was self-determined."¹³

Edwards clearly rejects the idea that the human will has the power of self-determination. The often repeated argument in *Freedom of the Will* is that if the will is self-determined, then it must be determined by a previous act of the will, which in turn must be determined by another previous act of the will, etc. In order to avoid an infinite regress in acts of the will we must say that there is a first act of the will. But this first act of the will is either self-determined or it is not self-determined. If it is self-determined then there is an act of the will prior to the first act of the will. But the notion of an act of the will which is prior to the first act of the will in a series is self-contradictory. Therefore, the first act of the will is not self-determined. If the first act of the will is not self-determined, then none of the subsequent acts of the will are self-determined either. Edwards concludes that the will lacks the power of self-determination alleged by the Arminians. Thus, Edwards clearly agrees with Dana that the human will is not the efficient cause of sin.

Although a human agent is not self-determined (in the sense that his will has the power of self-determination) it still does not follow, for Edwards, that God is the efficient cause of sin. I believe that Dana's argument involves a false assumption, viz., that sin must have an efficient cause. It does not follow that if God is not the efficient cause of sin that a human agent must be the efficient cause of sin, any more than it follows that if a human agent is not the efficient cause of sin that God must be the efficient cause of sin. This is not to say or imply that sin is uncaused. Edwards clearly maintains that whatever begins to exist must have a cause, but he never says that every volition must have an efficient cause. In *Freedom of the Will* he says it is his intention to use the word 'cause' "in a sense which is more extensive, than that in which it is sometimes used." (FW, 180) 'Cause' is often used to refer only "to that which has a positive efficiency or influence to produce a thing, or bring it to pass." (FW, 180) This is the so-called efficient cause. However, Edwards extends the meaning of 'cause' to include any antecedent condition, any ground or reason, why something is as it is and cannot be otherwise. Thus, a motive is the cause of a volition, but a motive is not the efficient cause of a volition. Motives are causes only in the sense of antecedent occasions.

Interestingly, Dana concedes this very point, viz., that for Edwards motives are only antecedent occasions: "By the cause of a moral volition Mr. Edwards saith he sometime means only an *antecedent* or *occasion* of such volition, not anything 'which has a *positive efficiency* or influence to *produce*' it."¹⁴ But, Dana asks, when Edwards says that the highest motive is the cause of a volition, is not a motive something positive? Do not motives positively influence volitions? If so, aren't motives efficient causes?

I think Edwards would agree that motives are often positive in nature. But this feature does not render them efficient causes. For example, if I buy groceries for an elderly, infirm person who is unable to leave his home, I may be motivated by a concern for this person's welfare. My motive is "positive in nature" and is the antecedent ground or reason that explains my behavior. But it does not follow that my motive is an efficient cause of my behavior. Edwards thinks

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Dana, p. 60.

that God orders actions, volitions, and motives such that an action follows upon a volition, and a volition follows upon a motive. But this does not mean that a motive, even if positive in nature, is the efficient cause of a volition.

(iv) In his final reply to Whitby Edwards claims that as "the supreme and absolute Governor of the universe" God orders all the events that take place in the universe, even "the moral actions of intelligent creatures." (FW, 405) Either moral actions will "be disposed by wisdom, or they will be disposed by chance; that is, they will be disposed by blind and undesigning causes." (FW, 405) God's sovereignty will not permit him to "leave men's volitions to the determination and disposition of blind and unmeaning

Edwards appears to be a nonconsequentialist when it comes to assessing the moral quality of acts of commission. We can never justify committing evil actions by appealing to good consequences. But we can sometimes justify permitting evil actions by appealing to the overall balance of good over evil.

causes, or they should be left to happen perfectly without a cause." (FW, 405) Since Edwards believes that nothing begins to exist without a cause, he concludes that moral actions are determined and disposed by God's wisdom.

As part of his final reply Edwards returns to the notion that God orders and disposes sinful volitions and sinful acts for the sake of good ends: "Sin may be an evil thing, and yet that there should be such a disposal and permission, as that it should come to pass, may be a good thing." (FW, 406) If one asks why God orders evil for the sake of good, Edwards appeals to the distinction between the *secret* and *revealed* will of God, between "his *disposing* and *preceptive* will." (FW, 407)

God's secret will disposes and determines, His revealed will disapproves and opposes. God's secret will is the source of His decrees, while His revealed will is the source of his commands. It is not contradictory for God to "decree one thing and command another."¹⁵ God can command us not to sin with His revealed will, yet permit sin and not hinder its occurrence with his secret will: "There is no inconsistency in supposing, that God may hate a thing as it is in itself, and considered simply as evil, and yet that it may be his will it should come to pass, considering all the consequences." (FW, 407) Edwards claims that God "does not decree the actions that are sinful *as* sinful, but decrees them as good."¹⁶

He points out that God does not decree a sinful act "for the sake of the sinfulness of the action . . . but for the good that he causes to arise from the sinfulness thereof, whereas man decrees it for the sake of the evil that is in it."¹⁷

Edwards claims that the Arminians themselves, whether they want to or not, must allow the distinction between God's secret and revealed will.

Who is there that will dare to say, that the hellish pride, malice and cruelty of devils, are agreeable to God, and what he likes and approves? And yet, I trust, there is no Christian divine but what will allow, that 'tis agreeable to God's will so to order and dispose things concerning them, so to leave them to themselves, and give them up to their own wickedness, that this perfect wickedness should be a necessary consequence. Be sure Dr. Whitby's words do plainly suppose and allow it. (FW, 409)

Edwards's use of the *tu quoque* mode of argument is again evident in his attack on the Arminian position.

Edwards concludes Section 9 by answering an objection which alleges that the notion that "God may do evil that good may come" is inconsistent "with the moral perfections of God." (FW, 410) Edwards replies that for God to permit evil for the sake of good is not the same as *doing* an evil for the sake of good, "for it is not to do an evil at all." (FW, 410) In the *Miscellaneous Observations* he notes that he is not saying "that God may commit evil, that good may come of it; but that he may will that evil should come to pass, and permit that it may come to pass, that good may come of it."¹⁸

Edwards appears to be a nonconsequentialist when it comes to assessing the moral quality of acts of commission. We can never justify *committing* evil actions by appealing to good consequences. But we can sometimes justify *permitting* evil actions by appealing to the overall balance of good over evil.

It is in itself absolutely evil, for any being to commit evil that good may come of it; but it would be no evil, but good, even in a creature, to will that evil should come to pass, if he had wisdom sufficiently to see certainly that good would come of it, or that more good would come to pass in that way than in any other.¹⁹

Edwards gives the example of an all wise and prescient prince who sees that an act of treason will benefit his kingdom. The prince may hate the treasonous act and yet permit its occurrence for the sake of the welfare of his kingdom.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Miscellaneous Observations*, p. 545.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. Edwards cautions that "the only reason why it would not be lawful for a creature to permit evil to come to pass, and that it would not be wise, or good or virtuous in him so to do, is, that he has not perfect wisdom and sufficiency, so as to render fit that such an affair should be trusted with him. In so

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies,"* edited by Thomas A. Schafer, Volume 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), No. 7, p. 204.

¹⁶ Ibid., No. 85, p. 250.

The prince is not committing an evil so that good may come of it, but he is willing (in the sense of permitting) its occurrence for the sake of the good that comes from it.

Edwards claims that for God to be a *morally evil* being who commits evil, He would have to act in ways that do not fit or suit his nature, He would have to have bad tendencies or inclinations, and his actions would have to proceed from an evil disposition or intention. (FW, 410) But none of these things are true of God's permitting sinful acts for the sake of good ends. A being who is infinitely wise, "and is the maker, owner, and supreme governor of the world," (FW, 411) does not do anything unfitting or unsuitable. Nor are there any bad tendencies in God. The crucifixion of Christ does not manifest a bad tendency in God but rather a good tendency, for "though a most horrid fact in them that perpetrated it, was of most glorious tendency as permitted and ordered of God." (FW, 412) Nor does God's permitting sinful acts proceed from an evil disposition or intention for what God aims at or intends is not sin but the good that comes from sin. The Arminians themselves admit this.

The Arminians themselves allow that God permits sin, and that if He permits it, it will come to pass. So that the only difficulty about the act of the will that is in it, is that God should will evil to be, that good may come of it. But it is demonstrably true, that if God sees that good will come of it, and more good than otherwise, so that when the whole series of events is viewed by God, and all things balanced, the sum total of good with the evil, is more than without it, all being subtracted that needs to be subtracted, and added that is to be added; if the sum total of good thus considered, be greatest, greater than the sum in any other case, then it will follow that God, if he be a wise and holy being, must will it.²¹

If God permits an action that yields a greater balance of good over evil than any alternative action, when viewed in light of "the whole series of events" that occur in the world, then this manifests a good intention or disposition on God's part. "If He be a wise and holy being," He must will that the action take place.

Edwards's replies to the Arminian "author of sin" charge rely heavily, then, on his use of *tu quoque* arguments, the distinction between causing evil and permitting evil, and the distinction between the revealed and secret will of God. As regards his use of *tu quoque* arguments Edwards is aware that there are certain points on which he and his Arminian counterparts must, in the last analysis, agree. He simply tries to get them to see that their scheme entails many of the same elements (e.g., the distinction between permitting and pro-

doing he goes beyond his line; he goes out of his province; he meddles with things too high for him. It is everyone's duty to do things fit for him in his sphere, and commensurate to his power. God never intrusted this providence in the hands of creatures of finite understandings, nor is it proper that he should." *Miscellaneous Observations*, p. 545.

²¹Ibid., pp. 545-546.

ducing sin, the revealed and secret will of God) as his own, and that, if they apply the "author of sin" charge to his scheme, then they must apply it to their own scheme as well. The distinction between causing evil and permitting evil rests on a broad conception of causation that allows for both efficient causes as well as antecedent occasions. The only sense in which God can be called the "author of sin" is as the ultimate antecedent occasion who permits its occurrence (and then only for the sake of good ends). The distinction between the revealed will and the secret will of God enables Edwards to claim that God can forbid sin while at the same time permit its occurrence.

Edwards on Moral and Causal Responsibility

There is a sense in which Edwards would concede that God is ultimately responsible for human sin. Edwards believes that God orders every state of affairs that exists, as well as all of the consequences of these states of affairs.

For, as the being of the world is from God, so the circumstances in which it had its being at first, both negative and positive, must be ordered by him, in one of these ways; and all the necessary consequences of these circumstances, must be ordered by him. And God's active and positive interpositions, after the world was created, and the consequences of these interpositions; also every instance of his forbearing to interpose, and the sure consequences of this forbearance, must all be determined according to his pleasure. And therefore every event which is the consequence of anything whatsoever, or that is connected with any foregoing thing or circumstance, either positive or negative, as the ground or reason of its existence, must be ordered of God; either by a designed efficiency and interposition, or a designed forbearing to operate or interpose. (FW, 432)

In this passage Edwards affirms that God, as the supreme first cause, orderer, and designer of every event that comes to pass, is ultimately responsible for every event that comes to pass, which includes human sin. God is causally responsible for every event that occurs in the world, either by a positive efficiency (as when He continually creates human beings and makes some saints by his grace) or as an antecedent occasion (as when He withholds his influence and permits sinful volitions). If God is causally responsible for every event that happens in the universe, then the important question is whether He can be causally responsible without also being morally responsible for human sin. Can God be blamed, morally speaking, for permitting human sin to occur?

Edwards's notion of moral responsibility is tied to his notion of praise and blame. In *Freedom of the Will* he explains what it means to blame a man for an action he has committed.

When a thing is *from* a man, in that sense, that it is from his will or choice, he is to blame for it, because his will is *in it*: so far as the will is *in it*,

blame is *in it*, and no further. Neither do we go any further in our notion of blame, to inquire whether the bad will be "from" a bad will: there is no consideration of the original of that bad will; because according to our natural apprehension, blame *originally consists in it*. Therefore a thing's being "from" a man, is a secondary consideration, in the notion of blame or ill-desert. Because those things in our *external* actions, are most properly said to be *from us*, which are *from* our choice; and no other *external* actions but those that are from us in this sense, have the nature of blame; and they indeed, not so properly because they are *from us*, as because we are *in them*, i.e., our wills are in them; not so much because they are from some *property* of ours, as because they are our *properties*. (FW, 427-28)

I am morally responsible for an action when my will is *in* the action, when the action is an expression or manifestation of *my* willing or choosing, somewhat similar to the way in which an art object is the manifestation or expression of the artist's creative ability and talents. If I lie and injure my neighbor's reputation, the lie is an expression of *my* choosing to lie. I am responsible for the action because *I* chose the act; *my* will is *in* the deed. Edwards limits the source of responsibility to the choice or disposition of the moral agent: "natural sense don't place the moral evil of volitions and dispositions in the cause of them, but the nature of them." (FW, 427)

If God were morally responsible for my sinful volitions, then my sinful volitions would be an expression of *His* will. But is His will *in* my sinful choices? Edwards once again employs the distinction between God's revealed and secret will in answer to this question. God's secret will (the source of his decrees) cannot be *in* the sinful volitions he decrees in the way a human being's will is *in* the action he causes, for God wills evil for the sake of good and not for the sake of the evil itself. If His secret will intends good and not evil, then His will cannot be *in* the evil he permits. Nor can God's revealed will be *in* a sinful volition because his revealed will hates sin and forbids its occurrence. God, then, is not morally responsible for sinful human volitions for neither his secret nor revealed will are *in* the sinful volitions he permits. His choices are not human choices. God's heart is never inclined to evil. The wickedness of the human heart is the source of sinful volitions. Men "never commit sin, but only when God leaves 'em to themselves." (FW, 404)

The notion that God is causally but not morally responsible for sin is not a novel position in the history of Christian theology. For example, in his *Summa Theologica* Aquinas says: The effect of the deficient secondary cause is reduced to the first non-deficient cause as regards what it has of being and perfection, but not as regards what it has of defect; just as whatever there is of motion in the act of limping is caused by the motive power, whereas what is unbalanced in it does not come from the motive power, but from the curvature of the leg. So, too, whatever there is of being and action in a

bad action is reduced to God as the cause; whereas whatever defect is in it is not caused by God, but by the deficient secondary cause.²²

Aquinas believes that the "deficient secondary cause" is the sinner. The sinner is "deficient" because sin itself is a moral evil and, following Augustine, evil is the privation of good. Sin is a deficiency or lack of goodness in the sinner. In God there is neither sin nor deficiency. He is not lacking in goodness and so is a "non-deficient cause." There is an analogy between sin and the act of limping, and between God and the power in a man to move his limbs ("motive power"). The act of limping is not caused by the man's power to move his limbs, but by the deficiency, in this case the crooked leg. The "motive power" enables the man to move his leg, but the limp is caused by the crooked leg. By analogy sin is caused by the sinner, the one deficient in goodness, and not by God, who is not in any way deficient in goodness.

Aquinas believes that God causes the very "being and action in a bad action." This implies that there is a sense in which God is causally responsible for human sin. Brian Davies points out that Aquinas "also agrees that God can be said to have a causal role when it comes to moral evil since he makes sinners and keeps them in being. His conclusion, however, is that defective activity, or effects resulting from this, are properly and primarily ascribable only to the agent in whom the defect lies."²³ God, then, is causally, but not morally, responsible for sin. Aquinas's God permits evil to occur, but does not will it directly or for its own sake.

Since God, then, provides universally for all being, it belongs to his providence to permit certain defects in particular effects, that the perfect good of the universe may not be hindered; for if all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe. A lion would cease to live, if there were no slaying of animals; and there would be no patience of martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecution.²⁴

Thus, Aquinas agrees with Edwards that God permits evil for the sake of the good that results from it and not for the sake of the evil itself.

I believe that Edwards would also agree with Aquinas that God is causally responsible in that He "makes sinners and keeps them in being" and that sin is defective activity issuing from the sinner. But he would deny that God is morally responsible for human sin, for neither His secret will nor His revealed will are *in* the sinful volitions and actions He permits.

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²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 49, art. 2, ad 2, trans. by Anton C. Pegis in the *Basic Writings Of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Volume One (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 477.

²³ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 96.

²⁴ *Summa Theol.*, I, Q. 22, art. 2, ad 2, p. 233.

Discovering Forgiveness

An Attempt to Understand Forgiveness within the Web of Reformed Theology

DANIEL R. LEDWITH

Introduction

This article aims to explore what has become a very ambiguous term for many: the word "forgiveness." Forgiveness is a central link in the lacework of Christianity, without which the whole becomes undone. Yet despite the centrality of forgiveness to the gospel, there is comparatively little written about it. Very often when the term is used, the meaning or concept is simply assumed. And when a definition of the concept behind the word is given, there is often very little if any effort made to show how forgiveness fits into the overall theological web of Christianity. One of the key aspects to a biblical understanding of forgiveness is the relationship between the forgiveness which God offers to his children, and the forgiveness we as children of God are commanded to offer to those who offend us. That aspect of forgiveness, is the central focus of this article.

In the following pages I intend to look at the Biblical use of the word and concept "forgiveness," looking at key passages where the word and or concept is used. Second, I explore the relation of forgiveness to God and his moral attributes. Third, I connect the vertical idea of forgiveness with the notion of forgiveness that we as Christians are to exhibit to others, which I call horizontal forgiveness. Finally, I conclude with a clear definition of forgiveness as it relates both vertically (between God and humanity) and horizontally (between persons).

Biblical Background

In this section I lay the foundation upon which the rest of my discussion builds, namely the testimony of Scripture about itself. I begin with a brief overview of the words in the Bible that are variously translated "forgiveness." I then look at three passages in Scripture where forgiveness is illustrated. These passages, together with the understanding of the various words used to connote forgiveness, form the basic ground work upon which a final understanding of forgiveness will be constructed.

The word "forgive" occurs 143 times in 122 verses of the Bible.¹ Of the 122 verses that contain the word

"forgive," more than 98% of them are in the larger context of the relationship of vertical forgiveness. There are six words translated as forgiveness in the Bible. Three are Hebrew and three are Greek. Though time prevents me from going into detail concerning the meanings of each of these words, I have included a brief survey of them in a footnote for the interested reader.² The words are כפר, נשא and שָׁלַח in the Hebrew and ἀπολυσω, χαρίζομαι and ἀφίημι in the Greek. These words taken together give a rich under-

word occurs in other translations sometimes differs slightly.

²The following information was gathered from Kittle, BDB, and BAG.

Hebrew

כפר *kaphar*—(to cover) 3 times; Ps. 78:38, Jer. 18:23, Dt. 21:8. This word conveys the meaning of covering up sin, hiding it, washing it away. It carries with it the notion of propitiation, atonement and ransom.

נשא *nasa*—(to bear, take away, lift up) 15 times. Primarily means to carry or take up in order to carry away. It has the notion of taking away guilt for the purpose of forgiveness.

שָׁלַח *sallach*—(to send away, let go) 25 times. It is used to mean pardon or forgiveness. This word is always used of God's forgiveness of his people. It is never used in contexts of person to person forgiveness.

Greek

ἀπολυσω—(to free, loose) once in Lk. 6:37. This word is understood to mean to set free or pardon a prisoner. Secondary definitions for this word include the ideas of letting go, dismissing and divorcing.

χαρίζομαι—(gracious forgiveness) 12 times in Luke and Paul. To freely and graciously give as a favor. This seems to pertain to God's forgiveness of his children. This giving is understood in terms of remitting, and pardoning. Further definitions include the idea of being very gracious to one another.

ἀφίημι—(sending away, letting go) 15 as noun, 40 as a verb. Carries the connotation of remission and pardon of guilt. Further uses of the word include leaving, giving up, abandoning and tolerating.

Daniel R. Ledwith is an M.Div. Middler at Princeton Theological Seminary.

¹This number is from the NIV. The number of times the

standing to the concept of forgiveness. The Biblical concept of forgiveness most obviously includes the idea of pardon and removal of guilt. To forgive is to abandon a claim on a guilty person or party, and to ransom them from some moral debt. In addition there is an unavoidable component of propitiation concerning forgiveness as offered by God. There are also clear overtones of atonement which carries with it the idea of restoring a relationship. Forgiveness is a washing away, a lifting away of moral guilt.

Leviticus 16

The Day of Atonement was arguably the most important day on the ancient Jewish calendar. This was the time during the year when all the sins of Israel were dealt with.³ According to the text, on the tenth day of the seventh

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month⁴ Aaron was to bring four animals to the Temple; a bull, a ram and two goats. The bull was meant to serve as a sin offering to atone for the sins of Aaron and his family.⁵ The goats were to be a sin offering and the ram to be a burnt offering to atone for the sins of the nation of Israel.⁶

A unique aspect of the Day Of Atonement was the place of the goats in the offering. The blood of one goat was brought into the Most Holy Place, while the other goat was made a "scapegoat" and taken outside the camp. This is something never done in any other ceremony. Philip P. Jensen suggests that "the two parts of the ritual fulfill the same function from different points of view."⁷ This is most likely the case since the text claims that both are said to take away the sins of the people.⁸ Andrew Bonar further points

out a possible reason for the seeming repetition of events, "To leave no doubt that sin has been carried away, a putting away of it which the people can see, as there had been one unseen in the Holy of Holies."⁹ This illustrates a profound contrast: God deals with sin intimately and personally. We see this in the bringing of blood into the Most Holy Place and to the Ark, while guilt is visibly taken away from the people and away from God. The people literally watched their guilt leave the camp. After they remove scapegoat, the priests sacrificed the ram as a burnt offering for Aaron and the nation. The remains of the bull and the goat were taken out of the camp as well and burned completely away.¹⁰

Matthew 6:14-15

In this passage God's forgiveness seems to be conditional.¹¹ If we will not forgive, God will not forgive us either. Does this mean that if we do not forgive others, we will cease to be forgiven by God? This cannot clearly be the case, for the Bible clearly establishes elsewhere that we are saved by grace alone. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." (Eph. 2:8)

Salvation is not dependent on our works or merit. It is God's work from beginning to end. Rather the verse seems to be read best as indicating that being able to forgive others is a manifestation of our having been forgiven.¹² The forgiving of others is a fundamental fruit of our salvation, but it is not the sufficient condition which produces it. God's grace is the sufficient condition; the fruit of His grace includes a forgiving spirit. In this way the relation to our being forgiven and God's forgiving of us is similar to the relation of faith and works. Good works do not produce faith (that is, they are not a sufficient condition) but they will, they must, accompany true saving faith (that is, they are a necessary fruit of saving faith). Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). If we are not forgiving, it is proof that we ourselves are not forgiven. If we are forgiving, it is proof that we have been forgiven.¹³ This same basic interpretation is also true for other similar passages in the New Testament such as Matthew 6:12, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37 and 17:3-4.¹⁴

scapegoat.

⁹Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus, Geneva Commentary Series*. 311.

¹⁰Lev. 16:27.

¹¹William Hendriksen, *Matthew, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 334. Cited hereafter as Hendriksen, *Matthew*.

¹²Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 335.

¹³Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 149. "Jesus is saying that to fail to forgive others is to demonstrate that one has not felt the saving touch of God." Cited hereafter as Morris, *Matthew*.

¹⁴Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 339.

³Roger T. Beckwith, *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), p. 34. Cited hereafter as *Sacrifice*.

⁴It is significant to note that the Day of Atonement, a solemn day where the focus was on sin and purification was followed the next week by the Festival of Booths a seven day festival celebrating the blessing of the Lord in the harvest. Lev. 23:33-43.

⁵Lev. 16:6.

⁶Lev. 16:5.

⁷*Sacrifice*, p. 36.

⁸Lev. 16:15ff. for the sacrificial goat and 20ff. for the

Matthew 18:21-35

To appreciate fully the shocking character of this parable, it is necessary to draw out the magnitude of the unforgiving servant's situation. If what is meant by "talent" was an Attic talent,¹⁵ then a man working for the normal working wage would accumulate over his life, around ten talents, if he was lucky. This refers to gross income, not what he might be able to save. The amount of debt mentioned—10,000 talents—is an impossible debt to pay off.¹⁶ France claims "a billion pounds would convey the impression."¹⁷

The king, upon hearing this plea for time to repay the money completely forgives the debt. The servant was not asking for forgiveness of the debt¹⁸ (though he must have known it would have been impossible for him to repay). But the king shows incredible compassion by going beyond what is asked and completely dissolves the debt.

The response of the servant is nothing less than repulsive. Happening across a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii, he physically attacks him and demands his money. This servant asks for time to pay the debt, which, in contrast to the forgiven servant, was very likely to be repaid. The forgiven servant refuses to listen to him and throws him in jail to work off the debt. Understandably, upon hearing this the King's other servants report the unforgiving servant's actions. His actions were an insult to the king "whose splendid magnanimity had been so grossly . . . treated with such contempt."¹⁹

In response, the king summons the servant and tells him that he had an obligation to forgive since he had been forgiven so much.²⁰ The wicked servant should have been very quick to forgive since he had experienced such forgiveness himself. The king then sends the servant to the jailers to torture him until his debt is paid in full.

The parable is unanimously interpreted as follows: people who are unforgiving will be punished by God for their own sins against God and their fellows. This debt to forgive others is on-going because of the great debt that we have been forgiven of.²¹ Gratitude for the grace shown us should make us want to forgive others readily.²² However, John Piper in his book *Future Grace* wisely points out that gratitude for past grace is not enough to foster forgiveness, but a view to future grace is necessary as well. As the wicked ser-

vant should have lived not only with gratitude to the grace he was shown by his king when the debt was canceled, he should also have continued to trust that the king would have remained forgiving as a motive for being forgiving himself. In the same way, Piper exhorts that we should not only look back in gratitude at the cross when we forgive others but should also look to promise of continued forgiveness when we are ourselves forgiving.²³

What can we say about the biblical concept of forgiveness? Clearly there is moral offense involved. This offense breeches the relationship between two persons. In forgiveness the price of the offense is absorbed by the offended person.

What can we say about the biblical concept of forgiveness? Clearly there is moral offense involved. This offense breeches the relationship between two persons. In forgiveness the price of the offense is absorbed by the offended person. This is symbolized in the Old Testament sacrifices such as the Day of Atonement offerings and is illustrated in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant. God's forgiveness of people is made possible by the spending of divine wrath against sin (propitiation) in a substitutionary sacrifice. Forgiveness involves the permanent removal of guilt (expiation) from the offending party.

A Theology of Forgiveness

Now I want to unpack the concept of forgiveness by looking at the place of forgiveness within the theological web of Christian doctrine. I will do this by exploring the relation of the nature of offenses that need forgiving and how this relates to God's character, specifically to his moral attributes and to his justice in particular. I then look at forgiveness among persons with a special emphasis on the relation between the forgiveness of God and our forgiving of other people.

Vertical Forgiveness

Offense against God is commonly referred to in the Bible as sin. Sin is sometimes defined as breaking the law of God by either commission or omission. This definition is the idea presented in the Heidelberg²⁴ and Westminster²⁵ Catechisms, as well as in the works of Charles Hodge,²⁶

¹⁵Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 473. Morris in his commentary on the same book points out that it is not really known which talent or of what precious metal (gold, silver or copper) is meant here. Hendriksen still brings out the point of Jesus' illustration.

¹⁶Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 705.

¹⁷R.T. France, *Matthew, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series*, general ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 277. Cited hereafter as France, *Matthew*.

¹⁸Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 706.

¹⁹Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 708.

²⁰Mt. 18:32-33.

²¹Morris, *Matthew*, 477.

²²Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 709.

²³John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters: Multnomah, 1995), p. 269. Cited hereafter as Piper.

²⁴PCUSA Book of Confessions, 30.

²⁵Ibid. 204.

²⁶Hodge, 2:180.

Louis Berkhof,²⁷ Millard Erickson²⁸ and has found recent affirmation in Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.²⁹ This understanding of sin however deals more with the outer actions of sin than with the root of sin. Francis Turretin affirms that the root of all sin is not pride—which is an expression of sin already present—but unbelief.³⁰ This thinking is present in Calvin's *Institutes*³¹ and is echoed in the writings of Edwards,³² and has been recently defended by John Piper in his book *Future Grace*.³³ Turretin admonishes against simply defining sin as "want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God."³⁴

All sin, being at its core the result of unbelief in God, is therefore an insult and denial of God's Glory and due honor. Here then is the offense, what needs forgiveness: a habitual blatant denial of God's glory and honor, and even of his place as God.

It is certain that we must not regard that fall as any particular sin, such as theft or adultery, but as a general apostasy and defection from God. It was a violation not only of the special positive law about not eating the forbidden fruit, but of the whole law included in it, and thus also of the obedience which man owed to God, his Creator (especially by reason of the covenant entered into with him). Thus here is, as it were, a complicated disease and a total aggregate of various acts, both internal and external, impinging against both tables of the law.³⁵

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²⁷Berkhof, 233.

²⁸Erickson, 578.

²⁹Grudem, 490.

³⁰Turretin, 1:605.

³¹*Institutes*, 245.

³²Edwards, sermon on Deut. 32.35, 2:7-12.

³³Piper.

³⁴Westminster Shorter Catechism, p.72.

³⁵Turretin, 1:604.

³⁶Turretin, 1:601. "Although formal and expressed aversion from God does not occur in every sin, yet there is a virtual and implied aversion even from the slightest. For the creature is preferred to the Creator and is loved more than God, while man is turned to it as to his highest good and ultimate end."

³⁷This last thought comes from seeing the word "God" as a title and not a name properly speaking. For a discussion of this

The very understanding of "offense" assumes a standard by which the offense is determined.³⁸ This standard is God's own character and specifically his holiness. Holiness encapsulates the whole moral perfection of God.³⁹ In saying that God is holy, we are saying that he is perfectly loving, just, good, truthful, righteous, gracious and merciful. His holiness makes it impossible for God to tolerate sin against him. If God is perfectly just and righteous, as holiness clearly implies, then sin must be punished to satisfy his justice and righteousness of character. For God simply to ignore or overlook sin would be to abandon justice, and would deny himself and his holiness.

This standard of God's character is of the highest importance and consequence. Our obligation to honor and love God is infinite as his worthiness of our honor and love are infinite. Jonathan Edwards explains:

A crime is more or less heinous, according as we are under greater or less obligations to the contrary. This is self evident; because it is herein that the criminalness or faultiness of anything consists, that it is contrary to what we are obliged or bound to, or what *ought* to be in us. So the faultiness of one being hating another, is in proportion to his obligation to love him. The crime of one being despising and casting contempt on another, is proportionally more or less heinous, as he was under more or less obligations to honor him. The fault of disobeying another, is greater of less, as anyone is under greater or less obligations to obey him But God is infinitely lovely, . . . infinitely honorable, . . . [and] His authority over us is infinite So that a sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous, and so deserving infinite punishment. Nothing is more agreeable to the commonsense of mankind⁴⁰

So we see that any sin against God is an offense that results in infinite consequences, because of God's infinite holiness. But if sin deserves infinite punishment how is forgiveness possible? The answer to this is the understanding that forgiveness follows justice and does not abrogate it. Punishment is the forerunner of forgiveness.⁴¹ To under-

way of thinking see Ronald Nash's book *The Concept of God*, pp. 14-15.

³⁸Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* vol. 4, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 1*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F., Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 4/1: 574.

³⁹Bavink, 213.

⁴⁰Edwards, Banner of Truth, *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners*, 1: 669.

⁴¹Barth sees that mercy and judgment are often paired together throughout the Bible. "The so-called 'Judges' of the Old Testament in the early period of the occupation of Canaan are described as man awakened by God and their main office is to be helpers and saviors in the current sufferings of the people at the hand of neighboring tribes. It was only in addition to this

stand this, I now want to bring us to a study of the atonement, for at the center of the atonement of Christ are forgiveness and justice.

Sin by its very nature causes a rift between God and humanity. The atoning work of Christ is generally agreed to be God's response to this rift. Where theologians differ is in their understanding of *how* God responded, to *what purpose* God responded and to what *exactly* God was responding to. The answer to the third question—to what did God respond in the death of Christ—is sin. "The very heart of the atonement is the overcoming of sin."⁴² Over the last two centuries many theologians have treated sin as being primarily a fixable problem of our humanity. While this idea of sin certainly has held sway in theological circles for the last century and a half, it is clear that the classical orthodox view of sin is making a great come back. Scheiermacher,⁴³ Ritschl,⁴⁴ R. Niebuhr⁴⁵ and Paul Tillich⁴⁶ are able to define sin the way they do, only by failing to take the Bible as authoritative. In fact, this restructuring of sin is accompanied by a willingness to re-interpret Scripture in light of modern enlightenment biases.⁴⁷ And crucially these explanations of sin do not give adequate reason for the atonement. If we are

capable of living sinless lives as, for example, Ritschl claims, then why was it necessary for God to offer an atonement at all?⁴⁸

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Two things happened on the cross that are relevant here. First, Jesus' death was a substitutionary sacrifice in our place. Second, Jesus suffered the wrath of God the Father against us for our sins. In these two ways, Jesus' physical death and his suffering divine wrath, God's justice was glorified at the cross.

Physical death is necessary for sin to be forgiven for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22). The New Testament is clear that Jesus' death should be interpreted as a sacrifice.⁴⁹ The ancient Hebrews offered sacrifices to symbolize tactually, visibly, and audibly, the sinner's repentance and the forgiveness of God.⁵⁰ Again, the inexorable connection between justice and forgiveness cannot be avoided. By the substitution of life for life, the satisfying of justice is symbolized, and by virtue of the substitution itself, forgiveness is visualized and atonement is achieved.

The Hebrew idea of sacrifice contained the notions of expiation and propitiation along with substitution.⁵¹ The vivid message of Old Testament sacrifices in general and the Day of Atonement sacrifice in particular was that they were done in place of God demanding the life of the sinner.⁵² They were all substitutions for the real guilty party. The sacrifices are said to accomplish expiation, that is the cancellation of the guilt of sin in the eyes of God,⁵³ and propitiation, the satisfying of God's just wrath for sin.⁵⁴ The idea that these sacrifices and Christ's atonement were merely ex-

activity in "foreign affairs" that they engaged in judging in the narrower sense of the term. Similarly in the New Testament—a fact which was later forgotten—the coming of the Judge means basically the coming of the Redeemer and Savior." Barth, 4:1:217.

⁴²Barth, 4/1: 253.

⁴³Fredrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. MacKintosh and J.S. Stewart (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1948). Schleiermacher taught that sin was whenever our "God-consciousness," our feeling of absolute dependence, is not the feeling from which our actions come (271). Sin must be conscious to be punishable, and therefore, original sin is not punishable (290).

⁴⁴Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, trans. H.R. MacKintosh (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900). "There is no standard of absolute moral perfection." Ritschl did not believe in original sin. Sin for him was essentially the denial of human unity in love (350).

⁴⁵Hans Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1956). Niebuhr denied original sin and claimed that the Adamic Fall was a myth. He did, however, see sin as including a willful moral act (108).

⁴⁶Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967). Tillich did not think the Fall was historical. (2:29). He also taught that Adam being finite could not have been perfect before the Fall (assuming there was one) (2:34). He denies original sin as a doctrine which is "burdened with realistic absurdities" (2:46). "Sin is a matter of our relation to God and not to any ecclesiastical, moral or social authorities" (2:49). Sin is not an act but a state of "estrangement" (2:44ff.).

⁴⁷Stanley J. Grentz, Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 52. Cited hereafter as Grentz.

⁴⁸Barth 4/1: 574. "Justification begins as man's acquittal from sin, from his being as a sinner . . . If man is without sin and therefore not a sinner, how can it [atonement] apply to him?"

⁴⁹Rom. 3:25, Eph. 5:2, Heb. 9:26, 10:10, 12-14, 1 John 2:2, 4:10.

⁵⁰Sacrifice, 17.

⁵¹Sacrifice, 28, 80.

⁵²Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 62. Cited hereafter as Wenham.

⁵³Sacrifice, 28.

⁵⁴Wenham, 57. "It propitiates God's wrath against sin."

piatory in nature as purported by Albert Ritschl and C.H. Dodd have been very well answered by Roger Nicole's article in the *Westminster Theological Journal* and I refer the reader there for a careful and complete discussion of the subject.⁵⁵ Both Nicole and Leon Morris point out that to extract the idea of propitiation from the idea of Old Testament sacrifice and therefore from the language of the atonement in the New Testament, one has to explain away the 585 passages in the Old Testament and where the wrath of God is directed against sin, as well as from the pagan understanding of the concept of atonement, which was clearly propitiatory in nature.⁵⁶ Paul Tournier advises that wrath is essential to a sinner's idea of God because "a God without wrath is a God without pity."⁵⁷ Both these concepts, expiation and propitiation, are crucial to a biblically-balanced understanding of the atonement.⁵⁸

Scheiermacher, Ritschl, R. Niebuhr and Paul Tillich are able to define sin the way they do, only by failing to take the Bible as authoritative. In fact, this restructuring of sin is accompanied by a willingness to re-interpret Scripture in light of modern enlightenment biases. And crucially these explanations of sin so not give adequate reason for the atonement.

If it may be said that the physical death of Jesus accomplished expiation, since "the wages (or debt) of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), then his "descending into hell" or experiencing the wrath of God against sin, accomplished propitiation. Jesus did not simply die on the cross. He suffered the wrath of God against sin in himself. This is clearly implied in his mentioning of "this cup" in the Garden of Gethsemane,⁵⁹ which is the cup of God's wrath,⁶⁰ and by his cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁶¹

Atonement is possible because God's justice has been

satisfied.⁶² The debt has been paid and his wrath has been spent.⁶³ The cross is clearly a glorification of God's justice. That justice is not a standard that God will lower for any reason. The cross is a warning to all those who would approach God to beware, beware His perfect unforgiving justice that demands not only strict payment of debt, but the personal punishment of drinking the cup of the fury of God's wrath.⁶⁴

This is the radical message of the gospel; God's forgiveness can only be glorified when his justice is first glorified. God is just in his forgiveness.⁶⁵ This is a strange saying. Is it true? Forgiveness is glorified by the cross because God absorbed the wrath and debt of sin himself out of love for sinners. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). God's forgiveness stands united with God's justice. The forgiveness of God is freely offered to all who will have it *because* justice has been satisfied.⁶⁶ The satisfaction of divine justice is a necessary condition for God's forgiveness to be made possible.

The final inquiry concerning the atonement is, to what purpose did God respond to sin with the atonement? It is irresponsible to say that the purpose of the atonement is primarily if not entirely anthropocentric in its design. L. Gregory Jones sees reconciliation between God and humanity as God's chief goal in creation.⁶⁷ This thinking, however, is very short sighted. The salvation of humanity, in part or whole, is never mentioned in Scripture as the reason God created the world or even a reason God created the world. Such thinking is the result of viewing God as being chiefly the expression of one attribute (in this case forgiveness⁶⁸) through which all the rest of God's attributes are filtered in their exercise and expression. Jonathan Edwards is correct when he says that creation was not a revelation of several attributes, but properly of all of them, a complete revelation of God through the expression of all his attributes.

It seems a thing in itself fit and desirable that the glori-

⁶²Barth, 4/1: 254-255. "It is only as His passion that it can be this action; only as sin is, as it were, taken in the rear, only as it is destroyed by the destruction and eternal death which threatens the world, only as this worst becomes an instrument in the hand of the merciful and omnipotent God for the creation of the best He has done that which is sufficient to take away sin, to restore order between himself as the Creator and His creation."

⁶³Turretin, 2: 354.

⁶⁴Rev. 14:10

⁶⁵Barth, 4/1: 487ff.

⁶⁶H.D. MacDonald, *Forgiveness and Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 121. Cited hereafter as MacDonald.

⁶⁷Jones, 254. "Rather I would suggest that doctrines like hell need to be placed in the context of the larger theological horizon of God's intention to restore friendship with the entirety of God's Creation."

⁶⁸The idea that forgiveness is an attribute is a question that is dealt with at a later point in this paper.

⁵⁵WTJ 17:117-157.

⁵⁶Roger Nicole, "C.H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation," *The Westminster Theological Journal*, 17:117-157. p. 149. Cited hereafter as Nicole, WTJ.

⁵⁷Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace: A Psychological Study*, trans. J.J. Henry and P.J. Allcock (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 144. Cited hereafter as Tournier.

⁵⁸Nicole, WTJ, 17:121

⁵⁹Mat. 26:36-46, Mk. 14:32-42, Lk. 22:40-46.

⁶⁰Ps. 40:6-8, Isa. 50:5, Rev. 14:10.

⁶¹Mat. 27:46.

ous attributes of God, which consist in a sufficiency to certain acts and effects, should be exerted in the production of such effects as might manifest the infinite power, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, etc., which are in God.⁶⁹

God's expressing of his attributes is really part of the glory

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of God. Edwards goes so far as to say "as though he were not in his most complete and glorious state without it."⁷⁰ The purpose of the cross then, was to reveal not just God's forgiveness, but his entire holiness and greatness of character. Roger Nicole expresses the same idea:

Conservatives have always stressed the love of the Triune God as basic to reconciliation: this love is the moving cause rather than the effect or product of Christ's atoning work. This reconciliation, however, is not accomplished in defiance of the eternal perfections of God—his justice, holiness, immutability, sovereignty; rather the fact that these, as well as divine love, are seen in their most challenging expression at the cross is what constitutes the triumph of the resourcefulness of grace.⁷¹

The cross is an expression of God's love, in that he allowed Jesus to die in our place while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:6, 8, 1 Thes. 5:10). The cross is an expression of God's grace, in that he is willing to forgive (Tit. 2:11, Heb. 2:9). The cross is an expression of God's justice and righteousness in that he showed his hatred for sin (Rom. 3:25-26). The cross is an expression of God's sovereignty in that he twisted the sinful designs of men into the greatest expression of his love (John 1:11-13). The cross is an expression of God's wisdom in that it shows how concepts such as pure justice and pure mercy can co-exist (1 John 4:10). The cross is an expression of God's foreknowledge in that he prophesied the event hundreds and thousands of years before Jesus was born (Gen. 3:15, Isa. 9:6).

The wonder of the cross cannot be so simply explained as merely showing one attribute over another. Forgiveness highlights God's love, goodness, mercy, grace, sovereignty, wisdom and power. God's wrath which is seen at the cross highlights God's justice, holiness, veracity, goodness, immutability, and sovereignty. While there is some overlapping, it is easy to see that the atonement itself reveals with

great clarity the marvelous attributes of God in their highest expressions.

This forgiveness is total and expunges all guilt concerning an individual before the eyes of God, allowing that person to experience the total love of God in a restored relationship with him. A person is no longer guilty in the eyes of God for the rest of his or her life once this forgiveness has been given, effectively removing guilt from the life of the Christian.

Horizontal Forgiveness

The starting point for understanding horizontal forgiveness is that people *by themselves* have neither the right nor the ability to forgive anybody of anything. This is true for at least three reasons. First, since all sins involve infinite debt, nothing can be forgiven apart from the infinite grace of God offered through the cross. No merely human person can erase the guilt of another before God. Second, no person has authority to judge or carry out punishment (in an ultimate sense). Third, the healing that forgiveness effects is supernatural in nature, not natural. People cannot heal themselves of pain and anger. Forgiveness is supernatural in both the removing of guilt and in the healing of pain and offense. Since I have already discussed the first and second reasons at some length, I will now look at the supernatural-ness of forgiveness.

Both these concepts, expiation and propitiation, are crucial to a biblically-balanced understanding of the atonement.

For horizontal forgiveness to be biblical in nature, it must be organically and vitally connected to vertical forgiveness. This vertical connection is what gives horizontal forgiveness its supernatural qualities.⁷² This connection is made explicit throughout the Bible.⁷³ The efficacy of horizontal forgiveness is a direct result of the Christian's union with Christ through the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ Just like faith is a divine work in the life and soul of the individual, so is the

⁶⁹Yale 8:428-429.

⁷⁰Ibid. Edwards takes up an objection that he foresees will be addressed here, namely, "Does this not imply imperfection in God that he is not completely happy without the use of his attributes in creation?" I do not have the time to deal with that here. This is taken up on pp. 445-450 of Yale vol. 8.

⁷¹Roger Nicole, "The Nature of Redemption," *Christian Faith and Modern Theology*, 193-221, p. 196. Cited hereafter as Nicole, *Redemption*.

⁷²David Augsburger, *The Freedom of Forgiveness: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), p. 19. "Freedom, The rush of God's strength, which brings forgiveness, gives in turn the ability to forgive." Cited hereafter as Augsburger, *Freedom*.

⁷³Exodus 10:17, 1 Samuel 15:25, Matthew 6:12, Matthew 6:14-15, 18:35, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37, 7:47, 11:4, 17:3, 17:4, John 20:23, 2 Corinthians 2:7, 10, Ephesians 4:32, and Colossians 3:13

⁷⁴The nature of the union of the believer with the Holy Spirit in relation to forgiveness is an area where an entire other work would be welcomed. Time does not permit the further treatment of it here.

desire and ability to forgive.⁷⁵ It is in fact a fruit of regeneration. We see the proof of our being the recipients of divine forgiveness by offering forgiveness to those who have offended us. This is the point of the parable of The Unmerciful Servant (Mt. 18:21-35) dealt with above

For horizontal forgiveness to be biblical in nature, it must be organically and vitally connected to vertical forgiveness. This vertical connection is what gives horizontal forgiveness its supernatural qualities.

as well as Mt. 6:12, 14-15, Mk. 11:25, Eph. 4:32 and Col. 3:13. The attitude of forgiveness is likewise often mentioned among other "fruits of the Spirit" in passages like Col. 3:12-13, and Gal. 5:22-6:1. Thus, forgiveness is seen as something that sets the Christian apart from the rest of the world. It is an identifying mark of salvation.

The supernatural effects of forgiveness are two: *the healing of the offended person and the restoring of the offending person*. The idea that the forgiver receives some benefit from forgiveness is demonstrated by the inclusion of propitiation in the definition of forgiveness as well as by the concept of atonement, through which both vertical and horizontal forgiveness are made possible. God's anger and wrath against us for our sin is alleviated by forgiveness. This is explicitly illustrated by verses such as "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy." (Mic. 7:18.) Jay E. Adams seems to deny this plainly,

What then is the purpose of granting others forgiveness? To do some good for yourself? No. It is to do good to another out of gratitude to God, honoring him by emulating His gracious forgiveness in Christ.⁷⁶

Such thinking does not take into account the idea of propitiation in forgiveness. Forgiveness certainly benefits the offending person, but to marginalize the effects of forgiveness in such a way is to radically misunderstand the biblical concept of love.⁷⁷ If God's forgiveness is truly the

model for human forgiveness, then these benefits—seeing that justice was served at the cross and that the relationship has been mended—is rightly the forgiver's in the act of forgiving.

Undisputed is the idea that forgiveness removes the guilt of the offending person. As we have discussed, only God claims the ability and the right to remove guilt. "Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance?" (Mic. 7:13). This idea is also involved in the idea of propitiation as well as the ideas of pardon, expiation, ransom and cleansing that together form the concept of forgiveness. This removing of guilt⁷⁸ is total and complete and leaves nothing in the way of a person's relationship toward God and consequently, toward other persons. As Karl Barth has said, such forgiveness is "not partial but total, not relative but absolute."⁷⁹

The Bible seems to leave us in an impossible dilemma: the price of forgiveness is too high for any mortal to pay, it is too morally pure for it to be humanly accomplished and beyond human ability to actuate. How then are we meant to follow the biblical command to forgive (Mt. 6:14-15 etc.)? Forgiving another person involves becoming the vehicle by which the practical experience of God's forgiveness becomes real to the offended person. This is a very important distinction because the person is not forgiving the offender in an ultimate forensic sense, nor was that person unforgiven before forgiveness was offered.⁸⁰ This implies that genuine forgiveness is not possible for those outside the body of Christ, as the cross is essential in the forgiving process. Apart from the cross there is no forgiveness of sins. This would be the clear implication of passages such as Ps. 51:4 and Romans 14:23 among others.⁸¹

In horizontal forgiveness the reality of vertical forgiveness is being realized though the union of the believer and right thing to do is legalism. I trust that the errors of Adam's

thinking are clear enough in light of the biblical passages spoken of so far. For a more biblical understanding of love and love ethic see John Piper's *Desiring God, The Pleasures of God* and *Future Grace*, and Jonathan Edwards' *Charity and its Fruits* and *The Nature of True Virtue*.

⁷⁸I am discussing here guilt as in relation to the law. I do not equate guilt with a feeling or feelings. Forgiveness does not get rid off guilt feelings, which may remain after real forgiveness has been granted.

⁷⁹Barth, 4/1: 570.

⁸⁰I am speaking in the context of Christians forgiving Christians. The Bible seems to discuss forgiveness always in relation to the forgiveness of God, as has been stated above. This brings the conclusion that only those experiencing vertical forgiveness can in fact actuate horizontal forgiveness.

⁸¹The Bible does not seem to talk about horizontal forgiveness between persons where vertical forgiveness does not exist. This seems to be the clear deduction of passages such as 1 Sam. 15:26, Jer. 7:16, 11:14, 14:11-12, and John 17:12. In these passages, forgiveness is not possible because the forgiveness of God is not extended to the offending persons. This point is, however, debated. Time does not permit me to say more than I already have.

⁷⁵Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 335. "Nevertheless it is God who plants in our hearts the seed of faith and of the forgiving disposition."

⁷⁶Adams, 96.

⁷⁷Adams sees love as a decision and not at all an affection. "Love in essence is giving" (162). He also thinks that biblical love is totally self-less, it is "forgetting self" (96). The motive for such love, Adams explains must therefore be completely other oriented and not be done for "by-products" like joy and peace" and "An improvement in one's relationship with God and the other person" (95). To do something merely because it is the

Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit for that particular offense in his or her life. This in no way should be understood to mean that the forgiveness offered by the offended person is not real; *rather, the power that makes the forgiveness possible is by the Holy Spirit and not in any way by the believer.* In forgiving, the offender pardons the other person and is healed of the anger against the person for whatever sin was committed. This is done by the Holy Spirit linking the forgiver and the offender to Christ at the cross⁸² where God the Father removes the guilt of sin and applies, again, through the Holy Spirit, the reality of that forgiveness to the offender, and removes the cry for justice and righteous anger from the forgiver, thus repairing the relationship.

A Working Theological Concept of Forgiveness

Vertical forgiveness is the divine act of grace and love whereby God lifts away and removes once and for all, the moral guilt of persons, and propitiates his own wrath⁸³ allowing him to be in a gracious, merciful and loving relationship with his children.⁸⁴ Forgiveness is always preceded by the satisfaction of divine justice which God requires for all sin against him.⁸⁵ Forgiveness is a free gift that is sovereignly dispensed on whomever God pleases to show his grace.⁸⁶ This gift of forgiveness expunges all guilt from the person in his relation to God totally and permanently.⁸⁷

This vertical forgiveness is organically and vitally related to horizontal forgiveness, the forgiveness of persons.⁸⁸ So strongly are the two connected that horizontal forgiveness cannot exist apart from vertical forgiveness.⁸⁹ Only those forgiven by God can forgive their neighbors.⁹⁰ In horizontal forgiveness, the offended person is brought by the Holy Spirit to the cross along with the offending brother. There, the offender sees that God's wrath was spent on the cross for the offense done, as well as sensing how much he himself has been forgiven; and in gratitude and hope, reaches out by the power of the Holy Spirit with forgiveness to the offender, freed of righteous anger.⁹¹ The Holy Spirit, using the offer of forgiveness by the offended person, brings the realization of the offender's forgiveness from God which he

has already received into existential reality.⁹² Seeing that his guilt had been removed at the cross and that the offended brother has been joined to that work of God by the union of himself to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit,⁹³ the offender is able to begin again his relationship with his brother, free from guilt and fear of punishment.

A proper understanding of forgiveness requires understanding the seriousness of sin, the awesome reality of God's holiness, the hopelessness of the sinner's situation before a holy and righteous God, and the dumbfounding love and grace of God that comes in the atoning death of Jesus Christ, bringing forgiveness to his children.

Concluding Thoughts

Forgiveness remains a neglected theological topic in our day. Until the believer properly understands how forgiveness relates to the rest of Christian theology, it is unlikely to be a very fruitful part of the believer's life. Could the problems with forgiveness so common in the church today exist because of a misunderstanding about what forgiveness is and how it is accomplished? The secular understanding of forgiveness has all but removed the vertical axis from the biblical ethic of forgiveness. Once that is removed, forgiveness cannot work, as its power source has been cut off. Perhaps the reason many Christians have such a hard time making forgiveness a reality is because they have a shallow relationship with God. "For he who has been forgiven little loves little." (Lk. 7:47)

A proper understanding of forgiveness requires understanding the seriousness of sin, the awesome reality of God's holiness, the hopelessness of the sinner's situation before a holy and righteous God, and the dumbfounding love and grace of God that comes in the atoning death of Jesus Christ, bringing forgiveness to his children. Only in such a light do we see the real the cost of forgiveness. Only in such a light does forgiveness bring new life to a person and glory to Jesus Christ.

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⁸²Augsburger, *Freedom*, 27. "The Christ of the Cross is our forgiver and our forgiveness."

⁸³Rom. 3:25, 1 John 2:2, 4:10.

⁸⁴Ex. 34:6-7, Ps. 32:1, 86:5.

⁸⁵Ps. 99:8

⁸⁶Ps. 130:4, Eph. 2:8.

⁸⁷Rom. 3:22-24, 5:17, 21, 8:28-30, Col. 1:10-14.

⁸⁸Mt. 6:12, 14-15, 18:35, Mk. 11:25, Lk. 6:37, 11:4.

⁸⁹1 Sam. 15:25-26.

⁹⁰John 20:22-23.

⁹¹Message of the parable of The Unmerciful Servant, Mt. 18:21-35.

⁹²John 13:10.

⁹³Rom. 6:5.

Naturalism In General And In Biblical Studies

JAY WESLEY RICHARDS

Introduction

I have an unabashed and unhidden agenda in this essay. To put it bluntly, I want to raise your consciousness to the presence of naturalism, which I consider to be frighteningly pervasive, fundamentally anti-Christian, and false. In so doing, I hope to contribute to a process of "inoculation" so that you will recognize the features of naturalism when you encounter them, and be less likely to be led astray by its unwitting advocates. I do not mean that all individuals who subscribe to naturalism are hostile to Christian beliefs, but only that, when we understand what naturalism is, we see that it contradicts essential Christian beliefs. As such, it is necessarily incompatible with those beliefs. From the Christian point of view, naturalism is almost wholly a bad thing. Unfortunately, there are many Christians who succumb to its assumptions. Such assumptions even permeate the thought of some scholars who teach in theological institutions. For this reason it merits close scrutiny.

I will first offer a short analysis of naturalism, noting some distinguishing characteristics. This will give us some handle on it. Second I will mention some helpful arguments against naturalism. Although I think there are many arguments available to indicate that naturalism is likely false or at least lacking any good reason to believe it, my main purpose is to convince you that naturalism just is not compatible with Christian belief, and that any scholarship which claims to be Christian cannot be simultaneously laced with naturalistic presuppositions. Third, to supplement the initial abstract analytical treatment, I will offer two common examples of the influence of naturalism in one important theological discipline, biblical studies. Of course biblical studies does not have a corner on the market. And I am not implying that all biblical scholars are closet naturalists (quite the contrary). But I am contending that some are.

I have two underlying goals, which form the subtext of the essay: to convince you that naturalistic assumptions find their way into theological disciplines in general and much biblical studies in particular; and to persuade you to confront and purge such assumptions from your own thinking (assuming you want your thought to be thoroughly "Christian"). Of course, detecting the presence of naturalism

in biblical studies is tricky. One is unlikely ever to encounter a spirited and consistent defense of naturalism as such in a seminary setting. Its influence is usually more subtle. It often shows up either as unexamined presuppositions or in the guise of theological arguments which on closer inspection reveal half-baked efforts at scholarly compromise with naturalism.

Finally, I will recommend some works that I think are essential reading for anyone intent on becoming fully inoculated against the creeping influence of naturalism. By combining the points detailed here with your own critical judgment and discernment, you will be less likely to be buffaloes, hoodwinked or otherwise bamboozled by the siren songs and unwitting advocacy of naturalism which are a part of contemporary seminary education.

A Definition of Naturalism

We may fairly dub naturalism as the "orthodox" metaphysical view of contemporary secular culture. It usually lurks beneath the surface in everyday life, and has explicit advocates only among relatively few academics, who hold a disproportionate amount of influence and power.

Most crucially, naturalism is a metaphysical commitment. Like every broad metaphysical belief, naturalism is concerned with what constitutes ultimate reality, or, as C.S. Lewis puts it, the "ultimate Fact."¹ Nature for the naturalist just is the ultimate fact. This belief makes it terribly difficult to get an established definition of the word *nature* to work with in a debate between naturalists and non-naturalists. The reason is that the naturalist just means everything when he says the word "nature." C.S. Lewis puts it this way: "Just because the Naturalist thinks that nothing but Nature exists, the word Nature means to him merely 'everything' or 'the whole show' or 'whatever there is.' And if that is what we mean by Nature, then of course nothing else exists."² The Christian or other theist will inevitably deny this claim, insisting that there is a greater, self-subsisting Reality, namely God, who himself created and sustains nature. Nature as such is a dependent and not the ultimate reality. Of course the naturalist may tolerate the use of the word "God," but whatever he means,

Jay Wesley Richards is a Ph.D. candidate in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.

¹C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Pub. Co., 1960), 7.

²*Ibid.*, 5.

"God" will always be a part of nature or the cosmos, as a process of becoming, history, the evolutionary process, or some such thing. The important point is that nature itself is for the naturalist the ultimate reality. This is a positive and a negative claim. It asserts what exists, and what does not exist.

Closely related but subordinate to this fundamental feature of naturalism is the commitment to the ultimate explanatory capacity of natural law. That is, according to the code of naturalism, no reputable scholar is ever to appeal to any category or agency which transcends the regularity of nature. Now, this particular component was easier to apply before the troubling revelations from quantum physicists, who maintain that matter at the subatomic level does not obey deterministic natural laws. Physicists tell us that quantum events are unpredictable, even random. If this is correct, then "natural laws" are not inscrutable laws, but useful macrogeneralizations ranging over trillions of small

Everyone should be able to agree that naturalism and Christian beliefs are incompatible, whether or not one is a naturalist. The only ones who seem intent on denying this obvious truth are certain theologians who want desperately to avoid a conflict with the spirit of the age.

quantum events. An analogy would be coin tossing. Any one coin toss is unpredictable, but a billion coin tosses will come out with about 50% heads and 50% tails. Quantum unpredictability or indeterminacy makes this component of naturalism a little more difficult to maintain on *a priori* grounds. However, even if the naturalist accepts this interpretation of quantum physics, he or she will still not countenance extra- or supernatural events or *agents* which could have an impact on nature. There may be subatomic randomness. But there most certainly is not any supermaterial agency.

Everyone should be able to agree that naturalism and Christian beliefs are incompatible, whether or not one is a naturalist. The only ones who seem intent on denying this obvious truth are certain theologians who want desperately to avoid a conflict with the spirit of the age. But such compromise is not conducive to clarity of thought. Christian belief is a type of "supernaturalism," which connotes at least that nature is *not* the fundamental reality.³

Some naturalists warn that supernaturalism leads to a derogation of nature. This is simply not the case. Christian belief in particular does not imply a denigration of nature or a denial of its reality. It requires only that we do not make the physical universe, matter, or nature into the fundamental

reality which exists *a se*, independently. The Christian doctrine of creation has always provided a robust defense of the reality and importance of nature. Moreover, the belief that a physical universe created by a rational being is a very stable basis for the assumption that nature has a certain type of regularity (although the Christian supernaturalist will avoid postulating a natural regularity which precludes the possibility of special divine acts in the created order).

Armed with this bare-boned definition of naturalism, we can now consider some popular arguments against this metaphysical monstrosity.

Arguments against Naturalism

There are so many good arguments against naturalism, that it would be redundant and tedious to recount them all here. Instead, I will offer some suggestive and provocative highlights. My purpose is to pique your interest. If these do not convince you, I hope they will encourage you to consult the works in the bibliography at the end of this essay for a fuller treatment of the subject.

A. Naturalism Cannot be Established

If we reflect on the epistemic status of naturalism, it becomes clear that it is impossible to establish. This is probably because it is fundamentally a negative claim. If this sounds like an overstatement, try to imagine an experience accessible to a finite mind which could verify it. How could any mind short of an omniscient one claim to have an experience which establishes the truth that there is nothing but physical nature? I do not think there could be any such experience. Of course, someone might insist that it is just unthinkable that there be anything but nature or matter; but that is a confession of that person's psychological condition rather than an argument for naturalism. Now, I am not claiming that since naturalism cannot be established, verified or confirmed, it is a meaningless doctrine. On the contrary, I think it is meaningful. I just cannot see how it could ever be confirmed, let alone established.

Of course, it does not follow that one cannot believe something unless it is established according to some empirical criteria. We all believe many things which cannot be established "empirically." I doubt I could ever establish that my friends have minds, or that there is such a thing as justice. I believe these things nonetheless, and I think I am warranted in so believing. What makes the "unverifiability" of naturalism so destructive to naturalism is that naturalists usually assume their world view enjoys some sort of scientific pedigree, so that only the uneducated and narrow-minded would dare challenge it. It is this assumption which is untrue. Once we consider the nature of naturalism (namely, a metaphysical commitment), we see that it has no more exceptional epistemic status than the most extravagant commitment of blind faith.

B. Naturalism is Reductionist

While naturalism is often justified as conducive to open-mindedness and clear thinking, in fact it amounts to a

³With this definition I am not addressing the difficult question of how God and nature are related. I am only claiming that for the Christian nature is not the ultimate reality.

ravenous global reductionism. It makes Ockham's Razor—which states “do not multiply entities beyond necessity”—into an ultimate metaphysical principle. Now even if we could explain most things without recourse to entities which transcend the physical universe (which is doubtful), does this procedure look like a good idea? If we must choose, surely in matters metaphysical we should prefer prodigality to parsimony, at least when the stakes are so high. Is it rational to subscribe to a belief which, if false, makes it *impossible* to recognize the most fundamental Reality of all? Naturalism once assumed proscribes one from evaluating competing truth claims, such as Christian theism. This alone should heighten our suspicion. If we are going to err, is it not more prudent to allow for the uncritical admission of a few nonexistent fairies and elves, than to rule out the possibility of the God on whom all things depend for their existence?

The naturalist is like the two dimensional figures in Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*,⁴ who cannot conceive of three dimensional spheres. These 2D figures inevitably interpret their encounters with spheres who intersect Flatland as mere circles, because the figures are confined to a two-dimensional world. From the perspective of Christian theism, naturalists dwell in a two-dimensional world view.

C. Naturalism is Self-Refuting

An intriguing but more difficult argument against naturalism is that it is self-refuting. One can find this argument in *Miracles* by C.S. Lewis, and more fully, in works by Alvin Plantinga. It has recently inspired several articles in contemporary academic journals such as *Faith and Philosophy*. Simply put, the argument is this: if naturalism was true, one would have no reason to trust one's belief that it is. This argument is too complicated to do it full justice here. I recommend chapter eleven of Alvin Plantinga's *Warrant and Proper Function*⁵ for anyone interested in a vigorous presentation of it. My experience is that those well educated in naturalistic ways of thinking (which includes me and probably everyone reading this essay) have a hard time getting this argument.

This is the gist of it. Consider the standard naturalistic explanation for the origin of life, which is that all life evolved *unguided* through natural selection (and some other mechanisms like gene drift) working on random genetic variation. All the diversity of life is explained in this way. The traits which natural selection favors are those which confer on the recipient a survival advantage.⁶ So ultimately the origin of our beliefs too must be explained in terms of *survival*.

Natural selection works because some mutations confer on the recipient a *survival* advantage allowing such individuals to propagate more abundantly than their less well

adapted relatives.⁷ While other genetic variations may occur, if they do not affect survival positively or negatively, natural selection cannot work on them. For example, natural selection may provide for sharp horns on water buffalo, but it would not account for a trait such as blue eyes (assuming for argument that blue eyes grant the water buffalo no survival advantage).

Natural selection can also work on inheritable traits that regulate *behavior*. So the water buffalo fortunate enough to inherit a gene that disposes it to run away at the sight of lions will survive to reproduce beyond its unfortunate cousins who see lions as potential mates or furry friends. Now superficially it might seem that this explanation would allow for the production of systems that produce true beliefs, since true beliefs are likely to be conducive to survival. So philosopher Jerry Fodor says, “Darwinian selection guarantees that organisms either know the elements of logic or become posthumous.”⁸ But this inference from Darwinian selection to true beliefs is fallacious, because *natural selection works on behavior, not beliefs*. That is, if some behavior bestows on an organism a “survival-enhancing propensity,” then natural selection can prefer it. But strictly speaking, natural selection would be blind to beliefs. What the water buffalo *believes* about the lion is irrelevant, as long as his behavior enhances his survival. He might believe that when he sees a lion, it's time to migrate quickly to another area in search for food. Or he might believe that the lion is his Mommy, but believe falsely that the way to get her to love him is for him to run away. Notice that such a false belief will still produce behavior that confers on the water buffalo a survival-advantage. The point is that any number of beliefs, most of which are wildly false, is consistent with a survival enhancing behavior. In fact, almost any belief could be tethered to a certain behavior. As long as the behavior is conducive to survival, it is susceptible to natural selection's invisible hand. Given such a process for the production of belief, how likely is it that any one of our beliefs is true? Ironically, Darwin himself realized this point more poignantly than many of his heirs:

[T]he horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?⁹

While some true beliefs might grant the organism a survival advantage, natural selection cannot pick and choose among beliefs, but only among behaviors. Patricia Churchland is a well-known evolutionary theorist, and she understands this well:

Boiled down to essentials, a nervous system

⁴(New York: Dover Pub., 1952).

⁵(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶Theorists often note that there are other mechanisms, but that natural selection is the most important of these.

⁷For a more complete description of this subject, see *Ibid.*, 19-237.

⁸Quoted in Plantinga, 220.

⁹Quoted in Plantinga, 219.

enables the organism to succeed in the four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting and reproducing. The principle chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive . . . Improvements in sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing is advantageous *so long as it is geared to the organism's way of life and enhances the organism's chances of survival.* Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost.¹⁰

So if this naturalistic account is true, there is a remarkably low probability that any of our beliefs is true. Most simply put, *natural selection working on behavior vastly underdetermines true belief. Since the theory itself is commended for belief, it has a component which generates skepticism.* And notice that this skepticism gets turned back upon the theory itself, because among those of our beliefs would be naturalism combined with the Darwinian account. So if they were true, we would have little reason to trust that our belief in them was true. So the theory naturalistically construed is self-refuting.

This may be too complicated to deal with in such a terse fashion. However, because my other purpose here is to consider ways in which naturalism unwittingly infiltrates the thinking of Christians, and in particular, some biblical scholars, I will move on to that subject.

Hybrid Forms of Naturalism

If I ended this essay with an analysis of undiluted naturalism, I doubt few readers would be tempted to adopt it as a life philosophy. Moreover, in the pure form in which we have considered it here, probably few of us would deem it compatible with Christian belief. Unless one is in a discipline that is explicitly naturalistic, one is unlikely to encounter such undiluted naturalism. In seminary particularly, one is likely to encounter a series of half-way covenants, attempts to compromise and reconcile incompatible ways of viewing the world. Because this leads to multifarious hybrids between two species of beliefs, the variety of such hybrids is dizzying and vast. So it is impossible for me to give a succinct analysis of the "nature" of naturalism as you are likely to come across it at, say, Princeton Theological Seminary. If you were in biology at Princeton University or physics at MIT, you might encounter naturalism in a purer form. But in seminary, you are more likely to face some hybrid version. So the best I can do is mention a couple of examples of the influence of naturalism in biblical studies, and hope that this will suffice to help you identify it when you happen upon it.

Methodological Naturalism

If you press the purveyors of such a hybrid, rather than getting a defense of metaphysical naturalism, what you are

likely to get is a defense of "methodological naturalism." Methodological naturalists need not contend that metaphysical naturalism is true; they only insist that all proper scientific explanations of phenomena will appeal to strictly naturalistic causes. So, for example, they claim that *scientific* biblical scholars will forego any appeal to divine agency, and will seek explanations that are naturalistic. Now why should the Christian accept such a claim? Why should Christian biblical scholars restrict themselves with such a biased definition of science?

There are several motivations for a Christian to acquiesce to methodological naturalism. One may be that some Christian scholars, as C.S. Lewis puts it, seek to be "honourable to the point of being Quixotic. They are anxious to allow to the enemy every advantage he can with any show of fairness claim. They thus make it part of their method to eliminate the supernatural wherever it is even remotely possible to do so, to strain natural explanation even to the breaking point before they admit the least suggestion of miracle."¹¹ Another reason is no doubt that many seek to avoid conflict. There are probably other less honorable motives, such as fear of being ridiculed, or simply

Even if [methodological naturalism] were appropriate in some disciplines, it seems clear that additional difficulties accrue to it for any Christian biblical scholar, because there are certain biblical events that the Christian affirms which any naturalistic methodology must deny.

a tendency to succumb to the group-think to which all humans are susceptible, including academics. This response can have very practical justifications. Scholars who challenge the reigning intellectual orthodoxy are likely to impede their chances for tenure, acclaim, and publishing opportunities. Finally, there are some scholars (I have met them myself) who unaware that they have imbibed from the fountain of naturalism. Of course, pointing out the motivations for accepting a belief does not amount to an argument for the falsity of that belief; so we should not make too much of such motivations.

Now I think that methodological naturalism is flawed in general, but I will not belabor that point. For even if it were appropriate in some disciplines, it seems clear that additional difficulties accrue to it for any Christian biblical scholar, because there are certain biblical events that the Christian affirms which any naturalistic methodology must deny. This does not mean that a Christian scholar will appeal to divine agency at every turn. But surely in biblical history there are some key points at which appeal to divine agency is mandatory for the believer. To require methodological naturalism at those points would be

¹⁰Quoted in Plantinga, 218.

¹¹*Miracles*, 164.

equivalent to denying the faith. Again, as C.S. Lewis puts it, "A naturalistic Christianity leaves out all that is specifically Christian."¹²

So, for example, if some Christian biblical scholar affirms the reality of Christ's resurrection, she will deny the truth of any historical reconstruction which does not accommodate it. But if so, then, if she adheres to methodological naturalism, she will be committed to a methodology that will inevitably lead her into error. This does not seem reasonable. Surely the main reason one would follow such a methodology would be because one thought it was likely to preserve truth. If some naturalistic definition of "science" prevents one from pursuing the truth,

A common strategy among Christians who seek a reconciliation with naturalism is to define God's relation to the physical universe in such a way that God's actions in the universe do not violate any naturalistic scruples.

then one should resist that definition of science, not engage in theological acrobatics to oblige it. If there are events in biblical history which resist naturalistic explanation, then sticking to a naturalistic methodology unnecessarily restricts the options. Phil Johnson puts it this way: "Methodological naturalism is a bias in the sense that it constricts the mind, by limiting the possibilities open to serious consideration. Theistic realism opens the mind to additional possibilities, without preventing the acceptance of anything that really is convincingly demonstrated by empirical evidence."¹³

Theological Justifications for Methodological Naturalism

Besides an argument from the definition of science, many biblical scholars offer theological justifications for methodological naturalism. A common strategy among Christians who seek a reconciliation with naturalism is to define God's relation to the physical universe in such a way that God's actions in the universe do not violate any naturalistic scruples. Probably the most relevant and sensitive of these scruples is the claim that the cause-effect nexus, the regularity of so-called natural laws, is not to be violated. More specifically, any exceptions to the closed system of nature such as are often purported in miracles are unthinkable. Among theologians and biblical scholars, a popular way of avoiding conflict on this front is to conceive of divine action in a way that does not invoke any supposed "exceptions." Since this maneuver is often complicated and

obscure, it helps to hide what is really happening.

They may bolster the strategy with the contention that, lo and behold, it would really be unmajestic or somehow inappropriate for an omnipotent God to "violate" natural laws anyway, since he is the ultimate source of those laws. Only an imperfect craftsman would set up a series of regular laws only to go back and tinker with them later. Therefore, methodological naturalism serves to protect divine majesty, since it prohibits appeals to any Heavenly Tinkerer. Or so the argument goes. Such a strategy essentially claims to deny naturalism as a metaphysic in our definition of naturalism, but concede the inevitability of "natural law."

There is a hornets' nest of dangers here, which I can only mention in passing. Perhaps most importantly, we should avoid allowing naturalism to define the terms of debate. On the one hand, we should not join a pusillanimous retreat from the claim that God can and does effect unique events in the physical universe. On the other hand, we do not want to be so mesmerized by the naturalistic portrayal of the regularity of nature that we uncritically define divine action in general or miracles in particular as intrinsically a "violation of natural laws." Unfortunately, steering the course with adequate nuance would require a lengthy discussion of the notion of miracle, which I cannot enter here. Nonetheless, let us be aware of the issues that lurk in the neighborhood of this discussion.

That said, I think we should initially be suspicious of "theological" arguments like this one, since they seem to attract most of their support among those already troubled by naturalism. More pointedly, these arguments look tailor made to avoid conflict with naturalism, and do not seem to issue from obvious theological commitments. After all, it's

Christians claim that God parted the Sea of Reeds, fed Israel manna, conceived a child in the womb of a virgin, became incarnate, and raised the dead. Any account of God that gets fidgety when confronted with these claims is going to have to do some masterful maneuvering to maintain the label "Christian."

not as if we have access to some *a priori* principle of what is and is not appropriate for God to do. If God has revealed himself as Christians claim, then surely it is more appropriate to allow the specifics of that revelation to shape or even override our initial impressions of divine propriety. And is it not an unavoidable part of the Christian and biblical portrayal of God that he can and does act in such ways that are not merely reducible to or synonymous with the regularities we often label "natural law"? Christians claim that God parted the Sea of Reeds, fed Israel manna, conceived a child in the womb of a virgin, became incarnate, and raised the dead. Any account of God that gets fidgety when confronted with these claims is going to have to do

¹²Ibid., 68.

¹³*Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 168.

some masterful maneuvering to maintain the label "Christian."

Examples of Naturalism in Biblical Studies

A. Dating of the Gospels

Such fidgetiness is betrayed frequently in biblical studies. While there are many valiant biblical scholars who successfully integrate their religious beliefs into their academic methodology, there are at least as many who have been sucked into the vortex of naturalism. Let's consider just two examples where naturalism tends to show itself: the dating of the writings of the synoptic gospels, and scholarly evaluations of the gospels' portrayals of Jesus.

There are many factors that go into the determination of the date and authorship of the synoptic gospels. For simplicity let's assume the Marcan hypothesis, according to which Matthew and Luke used Mark in compiling their gospels. If this is correct, then Mark is the earliest gospel. Of all the passages in Mark, probably the linchpin for dating it (and *a fortiori*, the synoptics) is how a scholar evaluates the status of Jesus' words concerning the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. In Mark 13, the disciples comment on the temple, whereupon Jesus declares, "Not one stone here will be left upon another; every one will be thrown down." Then, in verse 14 he says, alluding to a phrase from Daniel, "When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong . . . then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. . . ." Now these words of Jesus are decidedly vague, and so susceptible to various interpretations. Nevertheless, most scholars think that Mark (or whoever the author is) intended them to be read as a reference to the siege and fall of Jerusalem led by Titus in 70 A.D. Of course, they could be a reference to Caligula's failed attempt to put a statue of himself in the temple in 40 A.D. Moreover, the passage's vagueness could be a hint that Jesus' words connote a more general claim, since even the details it has don't quite square with the events surrounding the siege in 70 A.D. For, whereas Jesus warns that the inhabitants of Jerusalem should flee to the hills of Judea, tradition claims that in 70 A.D. the Christians fled to Pella, "a low-lying city east of Jordan."¹⁴

Still, let's set all this aside and assume that Mark intends these words to be a prediction of a future event by Jesus, namely, the destruction of Jerusalem. If we assume this, which many scholars do, then we are confronted with a dilemma. For on naturalistic scruples, detailed predictions concerning future events are impossible. Therefore, assuming (1) this passage purports to be a prediction about the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and (2) predictions of future events are impossible, then we can conclude that Mark, or this portion of it, was written around or most likely after 70 A.D. If we tie (1) and (2) to (3), the priority of Mark, then we have a bottom limit for the date of all the synoptics at about 70 A.D. Succinctly put, the conclusion

by scholars of a naturalistic bent is that the words in Mark 13 (and their parallels in Matthew 24:15 and Luke 21:20) must be a *vaticinium ex eventu*. That is, they must have been written after events of which they pretend to be a prediction.

But what if the scholar does not assume (2) [predictions concerning future events are impossible]? What if the scholar judges that, if Jesus is who Christians say he is, such a prediction is certainly possible? Well, it does not follow that that scholar will inevitably date Mark earlier than 70 A.D. Even if Mark 13 is a legitimate foretelling of

My point is that naturalistic assumptions are a significant constraint on the matter of dating these texts. And this is the case even among many scholars who, if asked, would positively deny that naturalism governs their thought. In fact, professors often avoid noting in lectures the importance of this single judgment for dating the synoptics; but the student who is aware of it can easily detect its effect.

a future event, Mark might still have been written after 70 A.D. There are other considerations that go into date assignment for the document besides this one. Nevertheless, it should be clear that a scholar who does not assume (2), or who positively denies it, will not bring presuppositions to the text which entail that it was written around or after 70 A.D. So a naturalistic presupposition exercises a crucial influence on such technical matters as the dating of a document.

For the non-naturalist, there are alternatives. To see this more clearly, consider the parallel text in Luke 21, which has slightly more detail than the text in Mark. In Luke, Jesus says Jerusalem will be "surrounded by armies." If one assumes the text was written after the destruction of the temple, one will count this extra phrase as evidence for that assumption, and, inevitably, date Luke after 70 A.D. But it is quite conceivable, all else being equal, that a non-naturalist, assuming the literary unity of Luke-Acts, could argue for a date around 60-61 A.D., since Acts ends there abruptly, and does not allude to any important events from 60 to 70 A.D. If this reasoning is joined with the Marcan hypothesis, then it would lead to a date for Mark prior to 61 A.D. Whether or not this is correct, it is at least plausible. A rational person could be convinced by such an argument.

My point is not that non-naturalists will automatically give earlier dates to the synoptic gospels and Acts. My point is that naturalistic assumptions are a significant constraint on the matter of dating these texts. And this is the case even among many scholars who, if asked, would positively deny that naturalism governs their thought. In

¹⁴Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 87.

fact, professors often avoid noting in lectures the importance of this single judgment for dating the synoptics; but the student who is aware of it can easily detect its effect.

B. Development of Beliefs About Jesus

Closely related to the naturalistic prejudice against putative predictions of the future is skepticism concerning the accuracy of exalted portrayals of Jesus in the New Testament. In general, the more lofty a depiction of Jesus is, the more likely that scholars will assign it a late date. Of course, no one doubts that development occurred in the Church's understanding about Jesus. Although one can effectively argue, for instance, that the doctrine of the Trinity is implicit in the New Testament, it is nowhere named or taught explicitly in the canon. It was not articulated formally until the Council of Nicaea in 325. And of course, reflection on its meaning, and on the nature of the person of Christ, continued to develop after that. So there is nothing intrinsically naturalistic in the claim that doctrinal beliefs underwent development after Jesus' life, death and resurrection. However, one's reconstruction of the nature of that development will look very different depending on whether one assumes naturalism or its denial. And again, such judgments will go into one's conclusion regarding the dating and authorship of the New Testament documents.

Biblical scholars affected by naturalism evince embarrassment at texts that imply that Jesus was aware of his divine status, or that his followers were quickly convinced of it. The more comfortable picture is one in which the second or later generations after Jesus' death came to think of him as divine. For Jesus or his direct acquaintances to believe that he was divine looks too much like a surd, a discontinuity with the way we expect things to evolve historically. To accept it, one would need to postulate some sort of "breaking in" on the usual course of things, which, as we have noted, is repugnant to the naturalistic spirit. That the village skeptic should display such an attitude is not surprising. What is troubling are biblical scholars who are officially opposed to naturalism, who nevertheless acquire this attitude in their scholarly pursuits.

One question draws out the crucial matter at stake: Did the incarnation and resurrection of Christ create the church, or did the church create the incarnation and resurrection? If one assumes the latter, then one will have to postulate a considerable amount of time in order for legends to build up around the person of Jesus, about what he said about himself, and about his birth and resurrection. To make such development plausible, many key players and eye-witnesses will need to have died off. No one could still be around who remembered where Jesus was buried, since an exhumed body would no doubt have refuted the fanciful claims about his resurrection . . . I think you get the idea. One will need to allow space for the growth of legendary accretions. If one assumes that an incarnation and resurrection are impossible, one will need to permit sufficient time for such fanciful ideas to develop, and one will likely postulate a *later* date for the writing of the gospels (and other New Testament documents) than someone who does not assume this (all things being equal). If that date goes past, say, 95 A.D.,

then one is likely to doubt the accuracy of the traditional authorial assignments of the synoptic gospels, since Matthew, Mark, and Luke would all be dead or at least very forgetful.

In source critical terms, naturalism will affect the same sorts of judgments. Naturalists will inevitably date texts that have an exalted view of Jesus as later "strata." They will usually deny that anything implying, say, Jesus' deity is first strata material.

This is all very simplified and generalized, but it should be clear that bringing naturalistic assumptions to biblical scholarship has very far reaching implications. I could multiply examples, but I will stop here.

Conclusion

Obviously there is no way to detail every form which naturalism might take in a theological setting. I hope I have said enough to assist you in detecting it on your own. Naturalism permeates virtually our entire intellectual milieu, and unfortunately this includes theological studies as well. But its "degree of saturation" varies from scholar to scholar and from discipline to discipline. If you are discerning and sufficiently critical in your thinking, you will recognize such variation even among the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, and the texts you read here. Some will be fully aware of the issues we have discussed, others will not. Some will be faithful to the witness of Scripture, some will be less so. Some will make abrupt and inconsistent exceptions to a generally naturalistic methodology for certain central events such as Christ's resurrection. Some will resist naturalism wherever it rears its ugly head. Some will do its bidding without resistance. If I could offer an injection that would inoculate us all against the influence of naturalism, I would. Instead, I have only words. However, instead of offering you my words, consider C.S. Lewis' epilogue to *Miracles*. He says:

. . . when you turn from the New Testament to modern scholars, remember that you go among them as a sheep among wolves. Naturalistic assumptions, beggings of the question . . . will meet you on every side—even from the pens of clergymen. This does not mean . . . that these clergymen are disguised apostates who deliberately exploit the position and the livelihood given them by the Christian Church to undermine Christianity. It comes partly from what we may call a "hangover." We all have Naturalism in our bones and even conversion does not at once work the infection out of our system. Its assumptions rush back upon the mind the moment vigilance is relaxed.

In using the books of such people you must therefore be continually on guard. You must develop a nose like a bloodhound for those steps in the argument which depend not on historical and linguistic knowledge but on the concealed assumption that miracles are impossible, improbable, or improper. And this means that you

must really re-educate yourself: must work hard and consistently to eradicate from your mind the whole type of thought in which we have all been brought up.¹⁵

If you seek a nose like a bloodhound for sniffing out naturalism, I recommend that you read the books in the bibliography below. Exposure to such books, combined with vigilant prayer and critical judgment, is the only currently available antidote to the infection of naturalism.

PTR

Bibliography on Naturalism

Edwin Abbott, *Flatland*. New York: Dover Pub., 1952. This is not an argument against naturalism *per se*, but it does illustrate the ways in which a negative belief system like naturalism can prevent one from seeing the truth.

C.S. Lewis. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Pub. Co., 1960. This is probably the best and most accessible treatment of miracles and naturalism, especially chapters I-X.

Alvin Plantinga. *Warrant and Proper Function*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. Chapter 11, "Naturalism versus Proper Function?," and Chapter 12, "Is Naturalism Irrational?" are especially relevant. Neither of these chapters is easy reading, but they contain perhaps the most precise formulation of the perennial problem of naturalism: If it's true, we do not have any reason to believe that it is true.

Phillip Johnson, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995. This is another very accessible treatment of naturalism and its pervasiveness in American society, particularly in academia. Chapters 2-6 and the Appendix, "Naturalism, Methodological & Otherwise," are particularly helpful. His focus on intelligent design as a legitimate scientific hypothesis highlights another field seminarians are likely to encounter residual naturalism: in systematic theology, particularly the treatment of the doctrine of creation. This is another interesting topic, which I do not consider here.

Roland Kenneth Harrison. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1969. Reprinted and revised, 1988. Parts One through Six are excellent for a vigorous response to naturalism in OT studies. The book as a whole is a great resource for any student in the field who seeks exposure to both the prosecution and the defense.

Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990. Like Harrison's book, this is a great resource as a sort of traditionalist "loyal

opposition" to the type of NT studies which makes its peace with naturalistic methodology. Especially see ch. 1 and Appendix D, "Further Reflections on the Synoptic Problem."

We all have Naturalism in our bones and even conversion does not at once work the infection out of our system. Its assumptions rush back upon the mind the moment vigilance is relaxed. . . . You must develop a nose like a bloodhound for those steps in the argument which depend not on historical and linguistic knowledge but on the concealed assumption that miracles are impossible, improbable, or improper. And this means that you must really re-educate yourself: must work hard and consistently to eradicate from your mind the whole type of thought in which we have all been brought up.

C.S. Lewis

Methodological naturalism is a bias in the sense that it constricts the mind, by limiting the possibilities open to serious consideration. Theistic realism opens the mind to additional possibilities, without preventing the acceptance of anything that really is convincingly demonstrated by empirical evidence.

Phillip Johnson

¹⁵*Miracles*, 164-5.

The Quiet Brilliance of Richard Wilbur

THOMAS VITO AIUTO

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth

— Adrienne Rich, from "Diving into the Wreck"

In Nathan Scott, Jr.'s excellent essay on the poetry of Richard Wilbur, who was invested as Poet Laureate of the United States in 1987, he suggests that Wilbur's patron saint may well be St. Athanasius. This proposition, which seems to me a good one, may illumine a reader approaching Wilbur's work for the first time, for in reading his singular poems you will find verse that confronts and embraces the divine light found in the "Things of This World" (the title of his third collection of poems, published in 1956), just as Athanasius demanded that we recognize the way in which God has united himself with humanity in the Incarnation. Wilbur's poetry, peculiar in his time, "wants to translate into the images and meters of poetry not the light that never was on land or sea but, rather, the light of ordinary day . . .," as Scott puts it. Yet it is not this attitude alone which differentiates Wilbur from many of his contemporaries. Not only does Wilbur's work bear the idea that the created realm is an adequate (possibly even the only) arena for engagement with truth and beauty, but his consistent and creative use of traditional poetic forms mark him as one who in many ways is set apart from the larger thrust of twentieth-century English poetry. Wilbur is somewhat of an anomaly, at least against the landscape of the poetry of this century, but the careful precision of his verse (not devoid of warmth), as well as its content, demand that we give his work careful consideration.

Remarking on his generation of poets (those writers whose art sprung from the tumultuousness of the World Wars and their accompanying atrocities) Wilbur himself states they felt "that the most adequate and convincing poetry is that which accommodates mixed feelings, clashing ideas, and incongruous images. Poetry could not be honest, we thought, unless it began by acknowledging the full dis-

cordancy of modern life and consciousness." Think of T.S.Eliot's *The Wasteland*, and its stylistic and thematic cacophony. This poem certainly possesses power which can be attributed to the author's willingness to follow the poetic muse beyond the traditional literary boundaries of language, time and space, even intelligibility. But *The Wasteland's* legacy is questionable. The incohesiveness inherent in Eliot's landmark work, and the work of other modern writers after him, gave birth to an artistic world in which the chief end of many new genres of art was to construct reality according to the artist's own perspective, usually a perspective shot through with contradiction and conflict. Surely to this time it had been the charge of the poet, among other artists, to advance his or her conception of the world as each perceived it; but spurred by the seeming meaninglessness manifested by the large-scale horrors of the twentieth century, Eliot and others began to write with the purpose, among others, of exposing reality itself as a construct erected and governed by the individual. Eliot summed up this artistic vision in his review of James Joyce's *Ulysses* where he could very well have been describing his own methodology in writing *The Wasteland*: "Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history . . . Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method." In necessary tandem with this view comes the abandonment of the world around us as a place where we can find anything of lasting worth, for what we find around us is merely of our own invention. The world around us cannot be trusted. Eliot is stating what Wilbur himself declared: the poetic method of many of our contemporary writers is one where reality is sought not in the things of this world, but elsewhere.

For a subtle, yet sharp rebuttal to this way of thinking let us examine one of the new poems in Richard Wilbur's most recent volume, *New and Collected Poems*, entitled "On Having Mis-identified a Wild Flower":

On Having Mis-identified a Wild Flower

A thrush, because I'd been wrong,
Burst rightly into song
In a world not vague, not lonely,
Not governed by me only

This brief gem of a poem gives the reader a first look into the varied poetic project of Richard Wilbur. For Wilbur, ours is a world where there is reality inherent in things. There is truth which can be named, or misnamed, with consequences for each. Yet it is important to see that

Thomas Vito Aiuto is an M.Div Senior at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Wilbur in no way eradicates the deep mystery which resides in our world; his belief that our world is one where truth can be found does not give rise to the false notion that we need not give our greatest attentiveness to the things around us because therein lies a truth that can be easily apprehended. No, it is precisely because the things that are essential can be observed and experienced in the natural that we are to engage the particulars of this world with eminent care, knowing that residing there is sublimity whose depths can never be fully plumbed.

The cause for the speaker of the poem to give voice is, as the title tells us, the realization that in his exploration of the world around him a wild flower has been "misidentified." This in itself points us to the fact that, for Wilbur, even in the smallest specific there is significance to which the most solemn attention must be paid, even in the diminutive beauty of a wild flower. Upon this mistake a thrush "Burst rightly into song," presumably an inscrutable but gentle response to the error of the speaker. The subtlety and unpredictability of God's good creation has a voice for this is a world, the speaker realizes, "Not governed by me only." Wilbur is aware that what we confront in this world is charged with meaning, with being itself. Again, critic Nathan Scott, Jr. puts it well when he says of Wilbur's work that it battles "... against the sort of triumphalist constructivism that was deeply a part of classically modernist poetics ... [he] wants very much to assert that poets cannot legitimately claim the right to create a world ex nihilo, since whatever it is that is truly worth celebration is already immanent within the primary structures of the world we face. As he (Wilbur) says, 'Central to and defining the poetics I am trying to suggest ... is the conviction that the order man may contrive or impose upon the things about him ... is trivial beside the ... natural order he may discover in them.'"

"Icarium Mare," also one of the new poems, is another lucid statement concerning the marvels to be sought and relished in this world; it particularly praises the pursuit of wisdom as can be found in our lives by humble and studied exploration.

Icarium Mare

We have heard of the undimmed air
Of the True earth above us, and how here,
Shut in our sea-like atmosphere,
We grope like muddled fish. Perhaps from there,

That fierce lucidity,
Came Icarus' body tumbling, flayed and trenched
By waxen runnels, to be quenched
Near Samos riding in the actual sea,

Where Aristarchus first
Rounded the sun in thought; near Patmos, too,
Where John's bejeweled inward view
Descried an angel in the solar burst.

The reckoner's instruments,
The saint's geodic skull bowed in his cave—
Insight and calculation brave
Black distances exorbitant to sense,

Which in its little shed
Of broken light knows wonders all the same.
Where else do lifting wings proclaim
The advent of the fire-gapped thunderhead,

Which swell the streams to grind
What oak and olive grip their roots into,
Shading us as we name anew
Creatures without which vision would be blind?

This is no outer dark
But a small province haunted by the good,
Where something may be understood
And where, within the sun's coronal arc,

We keep our proper range,
Aspiring, with this lesser globe of sight,
To gather tokens of the light
Not in the bullion, but in the loose change.

The poem begins by alluding to the somewhat common conception that this world is nothing but shadow, that reality is something which is far removed from us (one is reminded of Plato's metaphor of the cave). "We have heard of the undimmed air/ Of the True Earth above us," the speaker states, adding that some would have us believe that "We grope like muddled fish." Yet it is from this rarefied air above those of us "Shut in our sea-like atmosphere," the place beyond us which some believe to be "the True Earth," that Icarus body "Came ... tumbling, flayed and trenched/ By waxen runnels." In our attempt to ascend by our own strength to places above this world that we perceive as lofty and superior, we become like Icarus who flew so close to the sun that the wax which held his wings fast to him melted and he fell in to "the actual sea." As the poem progresses, Wilbur moves to talk of other explorers who have sounded the span of "the actual sea." Rather than Icarus, who endeavored to rise above this life to the empyrean by his own power, he speaks of Aristarchus who "first/ rounded the sun in thought; near Patmos, too,/ Where John's bejeweled inward view/ Descried an angel in the solar burst." The explorers, these who explore "Black distances exorbitant to sense," win Wilbur's acclaim, for they have inquired of beauty and truth at home, in their own lives. Aristarchus of Samos, a Greek astronomer of the Alexandrian school in the third century B.C., was the first to assert that the earth revolved around the sun; and John, the author of Revelation, his "geodic skull bowed in his cave," (not Plato's dark cave of ignorance, but an actual cave) being shown the things of God. This "reckoner" and this "saint" have sought knowledge by flinging themselves to the outer reaches of the universe only to be dashed down from flying too near the sun, but by examining the world around them, as well as themselves, with their hearts and their minds ("Which in its little shed/ Of broken light knows wonders all the same"). It is this sort of venture which rewards one with true knowledge. While some may say that explorers have diminished the standing of humanity in the universe—Aristarchus by declaring that it is the earth which revolves around the sun, not the opposite, and John by proclaiming that we are subject to a righteous and holy God—they have actually elevated hu-

manity by delivering the truth. That this world and this life is "no outer dark/ But a small province haunted by the good/ Where something may be understood"; and that in that understanding, unlike Icarus, who sought the greatest heights only to be destroyed by the Sun, we will stay "within the sun's coronal arc," and "keep our proper range." In that sort of wise restraint we will "gather tokens of light/ Not in the bullion, but in the loose change."

The art of Richard Wilbur is a delicate attestation to this easily forgettable truth. Yet because his message of quiet attentiveness to life is also demonstrated in the bounded nature of his craft, it can be difficult for us to hear this voice, or even begin to listen.

Annie Dillard wrote in *The Writing Life* that the written word, especially in poetry, is "weak." "... Literature is mere. It appeals only to the subtlest senses," she writes in her book, and we often cannot, or will not, attune ourselves to the fine modulations of poetry. Louder voices often prevail. Dillard reminds us:

Films and television stimulate the body's senses . . . in big ways. A nine-foot handsome face, and its three-foot-wide smile, are irresistible. Look at the long legs on that man, as high as a wall, and coming straight toward you. The music builds. The moving, lighted screen fills your brain. You do not like filmed car chases? See if you can turn away. Try not to watch.

The culture of the United States today is the impetus for artistic achievement which exults the striving of the individual, either to the end of great success, or even to the end of the striving itself. Witness the plethora of action-adventure movies which pit the determination and strength of an individual against any number of opposing forces, be they human (the Diehard series, any Jean Claude Van Damme or Sylvester Stallone film), natural (Twister, Dante's Peak, Outbreak) or extra-terrestrial (the Alien series, Independence Day), with the individual always able to overcome the antagonists in the final frame. Or consider the various cinematic or musical successes which are founded on the striving of the individual against opposition which kills or wounds the individual, but which deifies him or her in the effort (Leaving Las Vegas, Trainspotting, and some Gangsta Rap and Grunge/alternative music.) In so many instances we encourage and glorify those individuals who follow in the footsteps of Icarus. We root them on towards the sun, even knowing the treachery of its heat. Richard Wilbur's work discreetly calls us to a simpler, truly more difficult task. To explore ourselves; to explore that which is around us; to cultivate simple awareness of the real and the true which resides all around us. It is there, in that vocation, where we will be rewarded greatly.

Consider finally "Under a Tree," also a new poem from his latest work. Ten lines of iambic pentameter, arranged in two-line stanzas. Five rhymed couplets whose sparseness and simplicity might nearly land this poem in a book of children's poetry. Yet the message, not to mention the beautifully sound construction, would deny it such placement.

Under a Tree

We know those tales of gods in hot pursuit
Who frightened wood-nymphs into taking root

And changing them into a branchy shape
Fair, but perplexing to the thought of rape:

But this, we say, is more how love is made—
Ply and reply of limbs in fireshot shade,

Where overhead we hear tossed leaves consent
To take the wind in free dishevelment

And, answering with supple blade and stem,
Caress the gusts that are caressing them.

In this poem there is again a dichotomy made evident between two ways of coming to truth about a thing, this time the thing being love. At the beginning we are given a view of love as residing in an other-worldly, mythical existence ("gods in hot pursuit/ Who frightened wood nymphs") at the first: in this paradigm love comes to fruition by "pursuit" of the beloved, coercion of the beloved into "taking root" and "changing," and even "thought of rape." This is the model of love when conceived of as an idyll. This is love when it is not played out in real interaction between two parties with care and compassion. "But this," says the speaker of Wilbur's poem, "is more how love is made." Not in a netherworld, but in the world of sense; "Under a Tree," considering the very real forces that come into play there between the tree, the beloved, and the wind, the lover. There the speaker sees that the wind interacts with the branches: "ply and reply of limbs in fireshot shade." There is "consent" from the tree, who loses some leaves, but accepts this loss and takes "the wind in free dishevelment." Finally, it is in this freedom that the limbs of the tree, the ones who are being caressed by the wind, can take part in the relationship by "answering with supple blade and stem" and "caress the gusts that are caressing them." This is true love: free exchange between two that engages each, but never "frightens" or coerces or "changes" beyond recognition. One might even read this poem as a Christian allegory of love, with the wind as the Spirit of God "caressing" the tree, a creation of God, with soft "ply and reply." That, we know as Christians, is "more how love is made."

In a more recent poem by Wilbur, "A Digression," included in an anthology, *The Best American Poetry 1994*, Wilbur tells the story of a writer who submits a long-wrought work to an unknown destination. Having for so long devoted himself to his project which has now been completed, he walks away from the mailbox into which he has deposited his work realizing that he now must "ponder what the world's confusion meant/ When he regarded it without intent." Richard Wilbur's work is an attempt to continually regard the world with intent, to uncover the ontological truth which inhabits each nook and cranny of the world around us, and to report what he has seen and what he has learned.

Jerry Seinfeld and Soren Kierkegaard: Mastering Irony

A Critique of a Classic Television Show

MATTHEW L. KOENIG

It is commonly argued that there is one sure way to immediately draw the attention of average Americans—sex, and yet sex has been around so long and is so common that it is bordering on banal, and we must wonder when Americans will become bored with it. In the last ten years, however, another attention-grabber has come on the scene which is vying for par-status with sex for its ability to draw an audience—*Seinfeld*. Now, even though the average American is not the average reader of the PTR (our mission is far from over), in an effort to expand its readership, the *Review* has not shied away from publishing articles on sex, particularly the intractable issue of homosexuality in the Christian church. Since these articles and editorials have appeared, the *Review's* efforts have met with a modest degree of success, and readership and subscriptions are growing steadily. But we do not want to risk overexposure, and hence, in lieu of an article on homosexuality in this grand Double Issue (and in the absence of any great ideas for something on the late Lady Di) the *Review* has opted for the other sure-fire seller at the newsstand: *Seinfeld*. If the readership grows larger still, we will surely have proven ourselves to be “masters of our domain.”¹

But lest any of the *Review's* readers think that in this flurry of creativity and public relations wizardry we have forgotten the real thrust of this journal—to reflect and comment on contemporary culture through the lens of theological orthodoxy—rest assured that we do not publish on *Seinfeld* simply for the sake of attracting attention. We offer these musings in hopes that the reader will enjoy the reflections, will develop a healthy critical eye towards the

happenings and mis-happenings in our culture, and, now that *Seinfeld* is closing out its final season, may find an equally entertaining replacement activity for Thursday evenings—pouring over the thousands of pages written by Soren Kierkegaard.

PART I *SEINFELD'S* IRONY AGAINST THIS OR THAT

Considering the Essence of *Seinfeld*

And so we turn our eyes, with a wink, to the television series *Seinfeld*.² But is there anything for us to see? Larry David, who conceived the show with Jerry Seinfeld, remembers its inception as the two men were in a supermarket, bantering back and forth about products they saw, and like the proverbial lightbulb flashing on, the idea came: “This is what the show should be about—nothing!”³ But how does one begin to consider a show whose writers frankly and without apology declare that the program is “about nothing”? If one writes an article on a subject about nothing, will the article be about nothing as well? And how about the show's stark aversion to morality (the other guiding motto David coined for *Seinfeld* is “no learning, no hugging”⁴), does this mean that we will not learn from this article either?

We shall have an opportunity to reconsider these descriptions as we form our conclusions about the show at the end of the article, but for now we should recognize that in reference to *Seinfeld*, the terms “about nothing” and “no morality” take on a very different meaning than what we

Matthew Koenig is an M.Div. student at Princeton Theological Seminary, currently spending a year abroad at University of Tübingen in Germany and returning next year as General Editor of the PTR.

¹The generous and attentive reader will note that the theme of irony is included in the title of this article, and therefore will be pleased to find some irony infiltrate its form and tone. With this in mind, the reader will also understand that if *Seinfeld* and homosexuality share some superficial commonalities in that they are both highly publicized, they also differ enough that writing on the one subject may not demand the same degree of sensitivity as writing on the other. *Seinfeld* itself cautions us to beware of overlapping the two—see the episode “The Outing” where Jerry and George are mistaken for homosexuals (“not that there's anything wrong with that!”).

²For clarity's sake, please note that *Seinfeld* refers to the show. When I want to speak about Jerry Seinfeld, I will simply say, Jerry.

³*Entertainment Weekly*, May 30, 1997 #381. The author offers sincere thanks, sans irony, to this “Ultimate *Seinfeld* Viewer's Guide” which, in addition to fine commentary, offers synopses of all *Seinfeld* episodes through the eighth season. I will follow EW's model as I refer to episodes throughout this article: the title, followed by the episode number.

⁴*Time Magazine*, Jan. 12, 1998, p. 79. The Princeton reader will note the contrast between David's formula and its close cousin, which often seems to guide our preceptorials at Princeton Theological Seminary: “no learning, much hugging.”

might initially expect. Lack of content on *Seinfeld* means energetic, witty play with all the quirky little things in our lives which we don't otherwise have time to notice. This "show about nothing" can make an entire episode out of waiting to get a table at a Chinese restaurant ("The Chinese Restaurant," 16) or out of looking for a parked car in mall parking lot ("The Parking Garage," 23). It can even lampoon itself through creating a show within a show—

In ironic speech, for instance, the ironist always stretches out a field of space between his words and his intentions. This does not necessarily mean that the ironist wishes to hide his meaning. In this form of irony, argues Kierkegaard, the ironist achieves communication, because the bearer understands that what was said was not identical to what was meant. The ironic form of speech cancels itself. Seinfeld thrives on this very form of communication.

Jerry and George pitch a pilot to NBC, "about nothing." And "lack of morality" on *Seinfeld* includes an obsession with etiquette and social mores which, in our late twentieth century, have all but vanished; for example, if a man has just broken up with a woman, and has the hots for a friend of hers, how long must he wait before it is appropriate to ask his ex for the friend's phone number? ("The Stakeout," 2). Once we realize that "nothing" is not "nothing" in the ordinary sense, our question of how to address this show "about nothing" is quite surely answered: *irony*. Larry David's account of the origins "of nothing" corresponds to what Søren Kierkegaard calls "the most common form of irony, to say something earnestly that is not meant in earnest."⁵ And if irony was present at the show's conception, we should not be surprised to find it permeate the show itself—from its characters to its plot lines.

Søren Kierkegaard and the Concept of Irony

But irony is a tricky thing. What exactly is it? A mood, an emotion, a relationship? It is not loud and obvious, but subtle, resisting definition. Ironists and ironic situations do not declare themselves ironic or ask to be declared ironic. Moreover, those who recognize irony do not point

their fingers and yelp "Here it is! I found irony!" On the contrary, the recognition of irony often comes after the immediate experience of it, and is only labeled irony retrospectively. But we are getting dangerously ahead of ourselves. If we are to enter the quirky universe of *Seinfeld* through the tricky door of irony, we risk losing ourselves in our subject or our method. We should not go unaccompanied.

There is no sharper guide to irony than Søren Kierkegaard. In 1841, Kierkegaard defended his doctoral dissertation in philosophy at the University of Copenhagen on this very subject, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*. In his thesis, Kierkegaard critiques the use of irony in the philosophy of Socrates and the literature and drama of three of his nineteenth century contemporaries. But Kierkegaard's passion for the concept of irony in no way ends with the end of his thesis. He continues to develop his understanding of irony throughout his philosophical and literary career, and not only in content, but also in form. In *Either/Or*, for instance, Kierkegaard portrays in various literary forms what he can only state argumentatively in his dissertation. He speaks through the voice of an aesthetic, ironic character, and then responds to this character through the voice of an ethical character. In Søren Kierkegaard, then, we have a master of irony—one who can not only critique the use of irony in the works of others, but who can also create it in his own works, and then critique his own use of irony in his other works. For our purposes, Kierkegaard's analysis in *The Concept of Irony* will suffice. We will focus this analysis not on the characters Kierkegaard creates in *Either/Or*, but on those characters we find on *Seinfeld*.

"Man did not acquire speech in order to reveal his thoughts, but in order to conceal them":

The ironic speech of *Seinfeld*

But what does Kierkegaard, writing in the nineteenth century on philosophy and drama, have to say about a sitcom in the twentieth century? It is true that we should not overlook the leap in time or genre, and some of Kierkegaard's statements will have to be qualified, but to argue that comedy is not art, or that *Seinfeld* is mere "entertainment," and cannot therefore mix with the likes of Kierkegaard, would be intellectual arrogance. We will not have to look far before we notice the affinities between Kierkegaard's characterizations of ironists and the behavior and humor of *Seinfeld*.

At the outset of Part II of his thesis, Kierkegaard offers some twenty pages of "Observations for Orientation." It seems Kierkegaard himself is aware that irony is a "crafty fellow" (CI, 248) and wishes to aid his readers in finding their bearings. Here we will find our bearings on *Seinfeld* as well. To begin, Kierkegaard notes the first "quality that permeates all irony—namely, that the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence" (CI, 247). What the ironist shows in his words or behavior—the phe-

⁵Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, Edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 248. References to this work will hereafter be cited parenthetically under the abbreviation, CI.

⁶Kierkegaard quotes Talleyrand here on the irony of the diplomat's perspective (CI, 253).

nomenon—is not what he really thinks or means—the essence. In ironic speech, for instance, the ironist always stretches out a field of space between his words and his intentions. This does not necessarily mean that the ironist wishes to hide his meaning. Indeed, unless the speaker is duped by the wily ways of irony, “who likes to play tricks just as much on friends as on foes” (CI, 248), he expects that the hearer of the ironic statement understands its ironic packaging. In the case of an earnest statement not meant in earnest, “the remark is so earnest that it is shocking, but the hearer in the know shares the secret lying behind it” (CI 248). In this form of irony, argues Kierkegaard, the ironist achieves communication, because the hearer understands that what was said was not identical to what was meant. The ironic form of speech cancels itself.

Seinfeld thrives on this very form of communication. The verbal theatrics of saying what is not meant or implying what cannot be said gives the show much of its dynamism and spark. Witness Jerry and Elaine in “The Deal” (Episode 14): ex-lovers, now friends, want the benefits of both, and with eyebrows raised and mouths curved slyly upward they argue the pros of having “this” against the cons of damaging “that.” The very title in “The Contest” (Episode 49) sums up the ironic double-speak of this entire episode, in which the four characters vow for the honor of remaining “masters of their domain.” We do not need to be told what “this” and “that” refer to, nor do we need to be told what the object of the “contest” is. We share the secret behind the speech. Even though the phenomenon was other than the essence, in this form of ironic speech communication between the show and the audience was achieved. Or consider the popular “Yada Yada” episode, where George learns, to his delight, that he can hide the entire content of a conversation—usually embarrassing for him—under the guise of the “yada yada yada.”⁷ We share in George’s glee when he announces, “I can yada yada my whole life!”

This last example, however, distinguishes itself from the first two. Here the “secret” is known by the audience—we know what George is trying to cover up—but the listener to whom George speaks on the show does not share our good fortune. That, of course, is part of the joke. And yet this reveals another aspect of irony, that it establishes communication only for select participants in the conversation. In sharing privileged information, irony simultaneously excludes those who do not know the secrets. Kierkegaard claims this exclusivity means that “irony is always in the process of isolating itself; it does not wish to be generally understood” (CI 249). Now it has long been the trademark of soap operas to suck in its viewers by sharing secrets with them, forming a quasi-community with its audience that ensures ratings, but *Seinfeld* has done the same through ironic speech. In its double-speak and code-words, which recur ingeniously in later shows, *Seinfeld* offers special treats for the long-standing, loyal viewer. Only the faithful Thursday-night attendant knows what George means

by “hand,” for example.⁸ And if you have ever tried to employ “hand,” or “yada yada yada,” or any other *Seinfeldism* in a conversation, and have met with ignorant or even repulsed looks instead of the knowing laughs you were expecting, then you know just how isolating the universe of *Seinfeld* can be.

Moreover, if irony isolates as it communicates, what kind of association is based on isolation? Kierkegaard introduces a consequence of ironic speech which permeates the show: “irony, which is isolation according to its concept, seeks to form a society,” but it is unable “to elevate itself to the idea of community” (CI, 249). The “in-crowd” of *Seinfeld* viewers, therefore, are not the only ones isolated by the secrets of the *Seinfeld* universe: indeed, the first to be isolated are quite clearly the *Seinfeld* characters themselves. The scenes of the four jabbering in their own dialect at Monk’s diner portray nothing other than the social preoccupations of a self-centered, atavistic clique. In the manifold dating attempts portrayed on the show, not one character has penetrated the shell surrounding the select group, except as an irritant which is resented by the main players—a concise history of George’s engagement to Susan in season eight. Though Kierkegaard, of course, never saw the show, he can pinpoint the dynamics of the friendships between Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine as well as any long-time fan: “there is just as little social unity in a coterie of ironists as there is real honesty in a band of thieves” (CI, 249).

Reflective Irony: Jerry

But Kierkegaard has far more to say about irony than simply how it expresses itself in speech, and *Seinfeld*’s speech expresses far more than simply what it says. Kierkegaard also describes how the ironist thinks and behaves. The same rule that applies to an ironist’s words—that the phenomenon is not the same as the essence—applies for her behavior as well. If her words do not directly express her thoughts, neither do her actions. Indeed, just as the ironist will say something other than what she means, so also will she act contrary to her opinions. Such events indicate that there is always something deliberative about irony, even when it is spontaneous. This, insists Kierkegaard, is where we learn that “irony has a theoretical or contemplative side” (CI 256).

Seinfeld has a patently reflective side. It is most pronounced in Jerry’s stand-up routines, which opened and closed the show for the first seven seasons. What else can we call comedy which begins with the standard line, “did you ever notice . . . ?” Jerry singles out the peculiarities of daily events and idiosyncracies of people, removes them from their context, and magnifies them so we can see how ludicrous they really are. Alluding to the lack of male self-control with the remote control, for instance, Jerry says, “men don’t want to watch what is on TV, they want to watch what *else* is on TV.” Speculating as to why women do not exhibit this trait, Jerry offers his own anthropological theory: “men go out and hunt, women stay home to nest and

⁷For those who didn’t see the episode, “yada yada yada” picks up after the introduction to a sentence, replaces any substantive reasoning, and thereby paves the way for any arbitrary conclusion, e.g., “I walked into a room, and yada yada yada, I left soaking wet and dripping.”

⁸George uses “hand” to speak of power in a dating relationship.

roost" ("The Fire," 80).

If Jerry's stand-up is reflective, then the show is his process of reflection. His conversations, dating relationships, friendships, business transactions, cab rides and whatever else we see are all supposed to be fodder for his comedy. Note the similarities between what he discusses in his stand-up and what he shows us in the half-hour show—personal idiosyncracies, for example. A running joke on *Seinfeld* is the queer, irritating foibles of the people the main characters try to date, which compose the bulk of Jerry's reasons to break up with a woman: because she has "man-hands" ("The Bizarro Jerry," 129); because he suspects she has fake breasts ("The Implant," 57); because she refuses to taste his pie ("The Pie," 76); and because she eats her peas one at a time ("The Engagement," 105), among others. The other characters fare no better. In addition to her own "close talker" beau ("The Raincoats," 79), Elaine must also tolerate her friend's irritating "high talker" boyfriend ("The Pledge Drive," 85), and then, after she incites their separation, the "high talker's" replacement: the "long talker" ("The Chinese Woman," 86). These last examples also reveal the penchant for reducing the character to the idiosyncrasy itself, and foregoing the name altogether. In a fun twist on this formula, the idiosyncrasy is the name itself, as when Jerry has forgotten the appellation of his current flame, but remembers that it rhymes with a female body part ("The Junior Mint," 58).

While understanding how Jerry's experiences serve his stand-up, we must also recognize that his stand-up serves us. The stand-up routines function as introductions and conclusions to the show, entrances into and exits from the universe of *Seinfeld*. They establish a safe distance from the peculiarities of his world, and forge a bond of trust between us and Jerry. We trust that Jerry will meet us at the door of his universe, take us into it, and take us out at the end. In the show's opening, he introduces us to this week's bizarre theme; in its main portion, he offers a slice of his life to let us experience things first hand; and in its last minutes he neatly wraps it up and interprets it for us. In the stand-up, Jerry speaks to us as we are—outsiders, and provides us outsiders with the perspective we need to understand his world.

The framing of the show between stand-up routines is important for our understanding of irony. We have seen that Jerry provides us with perspective, but what kind of perspective is it? *Ironical*. Simply by virtue of the fact that everything we see is raw material for his comedy, we cannot take any of it seriously. Even the most earnest of events cannot really be earnest. There is always the wink of the eye, the notion that Jerry is letting us spy on his wacky friends.

Irony that discloses: Jerry and his friends

But on a deeper level, we see this ironic perspective influence Jerry's relationship with the other characters. While in his stand-up Jerry brings comic material *to* us, in his interactions with George, Kramer and Elaine, he brings it *out* of them. Kierkegaard considers such a project another enterprise of the ironist; irony "seeks to mystify the surrounding world, seeking not so much to remain in hiding itself as to get others to disclose themselves" (CI, 251). As he entices the other characters to reveal how bizarre they are, Jerry brings the comic material out of them. Kierkegaard explains

two means by which the ironist gets others to disclose themselves, and although his examples are more polemical than the cases in *Seinfeld*, we will find that Jerry employs the same modes to induce the characters around him to disclose their more extreme and comical attributes.

In the first expression of this form of irony, explains Kierkegaard, "the ironist identifies himself with the odious practice he wants to attack" (CI, 249). For example, "over against an insipid and inept enthusiasm, it is ironically proper to outdo this with scandalous praise and plaudits, although the ironist himself is aware that his enthusiasm is the most ludicrous thing in the world" (CI, 249). The ironist plays along with the action or person he wishes to interpret ironically. *Seinfeld* of course does this very thing with all of the ludicrous characters who compose his social circle. Consider Jerry's reception of George's outrageous antics. Whether he is exploding from his own frustration at his want of good fortune in the world, or concocting lies to woo women or secure jobs, George's behavior is seldom met with dismay by Jerry. In fact, Jerry will often encourage him by adopting the same stance. George's engagement to Susan provides a telling example. At the beginning of the episode entitled "The Engagement" (Episode 105), Jerry and George sit in their typical seat at Monk's diner. Reflecting on how he has just dropped his girlfriend on the

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grounds that she "shushed" him while they were watching TV, Jerry has an epiphany of the absurdity of their dating lives and asks, "What are we doing here? We're not men!" With so much ease does Jerry excite George's penchant for self-castigation, and George is soon out-pacing Jerry in self-loathing and miserable curses. George's wild inertia carries him to a spirited resolution to repent, and he offers Jerry his hand, presumably to seal an agreement between them, that Jerry takes, because "it is the ironist's joy to seem to be caught in the same noose in which the other person is trapped" (CI, 250). Next we see the clear distinction between Jerry the ironist and George the extremist. Jerry takes the woman to dinner again, and drops her again after watching her eat her peas one at a time. George, on the other hand, proposes marriage. When he shows up at Jerry's apartment with the big news, George finds out he has been had by the ironist, while the ironist continues to wave his arms and offer congratulations in a less than believable tone, because, as Kierkegaard notes, "the further his fakery proceeds, the more joy he has in it" (CI, 249). But Jerry's fakery comes to an

abrupt halt when he suggests they toast the event with champagne, but there is none in the cupboard. The levity instantly deflates, and in a most insensitive and even cruel voice Jerry watches the dejected George leave, saying only, "See ya' later."

While he takes on George's stance in order that George disclose himself, Jerry will often express the opposite mode of irony with Kramer. Kierkegaard describes it as the "antithetical situation" (CI, 250), by which he means not an antagonistic stance, but a teachable one: "[f]aced with a superfluity of wisdom and then to be so ignorant, so stupid, such a complete Simple Simon as is possible, and yet always so good-natured and teachable that the tenant farmers of wisdom are really happy to let someone slip into their luxuriant pastures" (CI, 250). Now Jerry never bothers to feign a good nature, but he will adopt a naivete where Kramer is concerned. This attitude is most pronounced in Jerry's response to Kramer's outlandish entrepreneurial or artistic enterprises. In contrast to the angle he takes with George, Jerry does not try to mirror Kramer; he does not fake Kramer's spastic energy or warped creativity. Instead he assumes an interested, welcoming posture which invites Kramer to divulge his latest idea. Among the schemes Jerry is privileged to hear: a do-it-yourself pizza place, supervised by Kramer-trained staff and managed by KramERICA industries ("Male Unbonding" 4); The Beach, a cologne that smells like . . . the beach ("The Pez Dispenser," 31, stolen by Calvin Klein in "The Pick," 51); a coffee-table book about coffee tables, complete with coasters on the cover and its own coffee-table feet ("The Cigar Store Indian," 71); and the Bro—a bra for sagging men ("The Doorman," 98).⁹ But perhaps George reveals the ironic motivation behind Jerry's alleged interest when he offers this appraisal of Kramer's life: "His whole life is a fantasy camp. People should plunk down \$2,000 to live like him for a week. Do nothing. Fall ass backwards into money. Mooch food off your neighbors. And have sex without dating."¹⁰ And as long as we are discussing characters *disclosing* themselves to Jerry the ironist, we should remember the instances of their *exposing* themselves to him as well: in "The Subway" (30), Jerry is lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking of the subway train, and awakens to find that the large gentleman sitting across from him has completely disrobed during his slumber. While the other frightened passengers huddle together at the other end of the car, Jerry—his cool, teachable, ironic self—simply smiles at the goldmine of stand-up material he has just found, and invites the man to tell his story. Such an opportunity is the highest joy for an ironist.

PART II

SEINFELD'S IRONY AGAINST ENTIRETY

To this point we have been guided by Kierkegaard's "Observations for Orientation," and have seen how the *Seinfeld* show, and particularly the thoughts, words, and behavior of Jerry correspond to what Kierkegaard calls the ironist. Towards the conclusion of his chapter of observations,

however, Kierkegaard reveals that these expressions of irony are only partial, only directed "against this or that," and that there is another form of irony *sensu eminentiori* (in the eminent sense), which "is directed . . . against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions" (CI, 254). Kierkegaard devotes the next two chapters, "The World-Historical Validity of Irony" and "Irony after Fichte," to disclosing the nature of this stronger irony. In these chapters he turns a more critical eye towards irony and how it is employed in the drama and literature of the nineteenth century. Following Kierkegaard's lead, we will also take a more serious stance towards *Seinfeld*. We will see that the ironic speech of the show, and Jerry's irony against "this or that" character, both function within a wider, all-embracing, ironic scope. This will lead us to consider again our initial musings concerning this "show about nothing." Finally, we will entertain the notion of mastering irony, and evaluate whether *Seinfeld* has met Kierkegaard's standard.

Kierkegaard on Irony and Actuality

To begin, we should grasp what Kierkegaard means by "actuality." We recall that Kierkegaard wrote this thesis as a student in philosophy, and here he shows his indebtedness as a young philosopher to Hegel's dialectics of history. Kierkegaard speaks here of "actuality" as a particular, given situation in the dialectical history of the world spirit, or idea, becoming temporally concrete. "[I]nsofar as the idea is concrete in itself, it is necessary for it to become continually what it is—that is, become concrete. But this can occur only through generations and individuals" (CI, 259). Kierkegaard has in mind here why and how history moves, why and how "the way things are" changes from generation to generation. For our purposes, it is enough to recognize first, that Kierkegaard wishes to speak of actuality as "the way things are," including the morals, beliefs, traditions, economic situation etc. that characterize a particular context or environment. But he also wants to speak of actuality as the "way things are given" (by the past), and the "way things will be" (in the future), because times and generations change. Secondly, we need to recognize how actuality influences personhood and selfhood. True, "actualized" persons do not exist in abstraction from actuality, but in relation to it—in relation to the present context in which they find themselves. They are engaged with their environment. On the other hand, true, actualized persons are not mere products of their environment. Their identity is not simply given to them by their context, but is given for them to *work out* in their context. Stated theologically, the Christian "becomes aware that life is an upbringing, an education, which . . . is specifically supposed to develop the seeds God himself has placed in man, since the Christian knows himself as that which has reality for God" (CI, 280). By nurturing the seeds *given* to him in the environment in which he has been placed, a person *works out* his identity before God. Becoming a person involves "completing the good work God himself has begun" (CI, 280).

To understand the ironist, we must first understand where he stands in relation to actuality, and then ask how this relation influences his becoming a self before God. In fact, the ironist does not stand in relation to actuality at all,

⁹List compiled in *Entertainment Weekly*, 38.

¹⁰Cited in *Entertainment Weekly*, 28.

but outside and above everything in the current environment. As Kierkegaard explains, "for the ironic subject, the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. . . ." (CI, 261). Nothing that the ironist encounters or experiences makes any claim on him. The ironist even denies the "givenness" of the given actuality. Insofar as actuality is given, this implies a relationship to a past, a tradition which has formed and guided it. Irony, however, turns this relationship upside down, and forms a past for itself. As Kierkegaard phrases it, irony "assumes" a past, and with its characteristic twist: "to the extent that irony is good-natured enough to assume a past, this past must be of such a nature that irony can have a free hand with it and play its game with it" (CI, 277). So the past is not something real and meaningful, but an object of play for irony. The ironist has not *been placed* in an actual context, but *places* the context in relation to himself.

While irony's relation to the past is merely playful, its relation to the future is non-existent. We can appreciate this relationship by way of comparison with a prophet. The prophetic individual is "also lost to the actuality to which he belongs" (CI, 260). He does not belong to his generation, but he does "sp[y] the new in the distance, in dim and undefined contours" (CI, 260). The ironist has no such perspective towards the future. "The ironist . . . has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it. That which is coming is hidden from him, lies behind his back, but the actuality he so antagonistically confronts is what he must destroy; upon this he focuses his burning gaze" (CI, 261). The prophet turns his face towards the future in hope; the ironist turns his face towards the present in disgust.

Playing with Actuality and Identity: the *Seinfeld* Pretenders

How does *Seinfeld* figure into this picture? Are Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer irreconcilable enemies of contemporary society, out to destroy their cultural environment and make way for the new actuality? Asking such a question strikes us as immediately absurd, but precisely the absurdity of it should lead us to see the ironic position of the show. Indeed, the four characters cannot fight *for* anything, for to do so would be to look to the future, with hope and a goal. This is the role of the prophet, the tragic hero, and the revolutionary, but not the ironist. The ironist is the one who does not look towards the future, but nevertheless works against the present.

So how does the ironist work? How does the ironist destroy? According to Kierkegaard, "since the ironist does not have the new in his power, . . . he destroys the given actuality by the given actuality itself" (CI, 262). The answer is not so tricky as it sounds. Irony cannot replace the given actuality, but it can deny its validity, its claim, and once the given actuality can no longer make a claim, it loses its vitality, and passes away. As Kierkegaard explains, the ironist "permits the established to remain, but for him it has no validity; meanwhile, he pretends as if it did have validity for him, and under this mask he leads it to its certain downfall" (CI, 264). The ironist destroys as he pretends, and the destroying is in the pretending.

In this "meanwhile," behind this "pretending," under this "mask," we may find it easier to think of *Seinfeld*. Indeed, the four characters are masters of pretending. We have already seen how Jerry takes on various perspectives for the sake of his comedy, but now we must see in a more general, and more serious, sense, how the entirety of their lives completely depends on "pretending" and "playing." Here let us recall how Kierkegaard explains the way in which actuality and human selfhood relate with one another. Through engagement with actuality a person realizes what he is given to do, to work out. But not so the ironist. Kierkegaard contends that "as actuality has lost its validity for the ironic subject, he himself has to a certain degree become unactual" (CI, 259). This means that abstraction and separation from the actual results in a void where a person needs content: "the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there" (CI, 262). And if content is not given to the subject, then the subject must create the content: "For the ironist, context . . . has no validity, and since it is not his concern to form himself in such a way that he fits into his environment, then the environment must be formed to fit him—in other words, he poetically composes not only himself but he poetically composes his environment also" (CI, 283). The ironist "poetically composes"—*creates*—his identity and his environment.

This is precisely what the *Seinfeld* characters are all about—creating themselves and their environment. In only the second episode of the series, George has already introduced his fictitious pseudonym—the importer/exporter

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Art Vandelay—who surfaces regularly in subsequent programs ("The Stakeout," 2). Vandelay is the only bogus alter-ego with a name, but there are plenty of others to list. At any moment George is capable of fabricating an identity to fit the moment: convinced that women are more attracted to married men, he pretends to be married ("The Apartment," 10); taken in by a gracious hostess who believes he is an out-of-towner, he pretends to be a New York outsider ("The Muffin Tops," 147); having been introduced to a woman as a marine biologist, he pretends to be an expert on whales ("The Marine Biologist," 75); having been taken for a "bad boy" by a curious woman, he pretends to be a near-forty delinquent ("The Little Kicks," 130); and perhaps the most revealing example, after his realization in "The Opposite" that his life has ended up completely opposite from what he intended, he resolves to create himself anew by acting purely against his instincts ("The Opposite," 82). After this litany of identities, is it even possible to answer the question, Who is George? Perhaps he answers it best himself, "I lie every

second of the day. My whole life is a sham."¹¹ Indeed, George's life is a lie and a sham because he must compensate for his lack of real identity. This void demands to be fed. Where there is no relation to actuality, there is nothing to give the subject a substantive identity.

While they are composing their identities, the characters are likewise composing their environment. *Seinfeld's* love for playing with etiquette reveals the other aspect of the abstracted relationship with actuality, the destruction that comes by way of pretending that what is established has validity, while it really has none. The notion of etiquette is "established," but it has no validity or authority. The characters are free to play and pretend and create their own rules, all the while undermining the power of established etiquette actually to guide lives and influence behavior. The length of the list of the characters cogitating over the significance of

The show is precisely about "nothing" in that at each and every moment it is avoiding "something"—reality, actuality, truth. The distortions become clear: what the players view as the negative—boredom—is truly the positive—actuality. Consequently, what we see as the expression of their characters—George's lying, Kramer's schemes, Elaine's relationships, Jerry's observations—is truly the expression of their lack of character.

this or that rivals George's catalog of play roles: when is it appropriate for one to "re-gift" a gift or "de-gift" a gift? ("The Label Maker," 94 and "The Rye," 115); how close must the finger come to the nostril before a scratch becomes a pick? ("The Pick," 51); is it always wrong to double dip a chip in the sour cream n' onion? ("The Implant," 57); what does an open-lip kiss from an acquaintance at the gym convey? ("The Wife," 78); what do you do when your date "takes it out" at a restaurant? ("The Stand-In," 77); is it offensive to make out in the back row of the theater during "Schindler's List" ("The Raincoats," 79)?

We should not miss the frequency with which questions about sexual etiquette arise. Like everything in the lives of these characters, sex is a game to be played. It has no "given" significance in itself, but only gains significance by becoming an object of play for the ironists. This applies, moreover, to their dating relationships as a whole. These characters cannot forge lasting relationships, because they can only pretend to be in relationships. When for once Elaine experiences the anomaly of a sincere beau and, somewhat nonplussed, confides in Jerry that her latest "doesn't play games," he responds, "no games? What's the

point of dating without games? How do you know if you're winning . . .?" ("The Couch," 87). Writing the rules for etiquette, writing the rules for sex, and all with an attitude of pretend and play: this is the ironic composition of environment, by which any significance of the given, the actual, is undermined and destroyed.

Evaluating *Seinfeld's* Irony against Entirety

So where does one begin to evaluate and engage this irony of infinite, absolute negativity? Kierkegaard warns that it is difficult to pin down in moral terms: "it cannot really be said that the ironist places himself outside and above morality and ethics, but he lives far too abstractly, far too metaphysically and esthetically to reach the concretion of the moral and the ethical" (CI, 283). Kierkegaard argues that morality and ethics are terms which measure the individual's engagement with the actual, so when that engagement is suspended, moral appraisal is difficult. We wind up no further than where we started, because the ironist is capable of including and dissolving moral criticisms within the process of creating himself and his environment; "for him, life is a drama, and what absorbs him is the ingenious complication of this drama. He himself is a spectator, even when he himself is the one acting" (CI, 283). At times the ironist can do good and appear ethical, but it is only one of the identities he takes on. "He is inspired by self-sacrificing virtue the way a spectator is inspired by it in a theater. . . ." (CI, 284). He can mimic the behavior of an ethical person, but never makes it his own, and never consistently. This is why the *Seinfeld* characters so often seem to have epiphanies about the futility and immorality of their lives, and can even resolve to make changes, even do public service, but nothing ever sticks. The ironist "repents, but he repents esthetically, not ethically. In the moment of repentance, he is outside and above his repentance, testing to see . . . whether it could do as a line in the mouth of a poetic character" (CI, 284). We can imagine George labeling one of his alter-egos "repenting George," but this would not be George any more than any of his other identities are George. It is yet another instance of him juggling his own self.

If irony will swallow up any concrete, engaged perspective in its abstracted perspective, then the way to evaluate it is quite simply from its own suspended state. The danger for the ironist, so utterly suspended, is utter disintegration: "as the ironist poetically composes himself and his environment with the greatest possible poetic license, as he lives in this totally hypothetical and subjunctive way, his life loses all continuity" (CI, 284). If we accept that the ironist allows nothing to "tie him down" to actuality, then we must ask, what holds him up, above actuality? Kierkegaard argues that there is a continuity, "a bond which ties these contrasts together" (CI 285). But as he discloses this continuity, the very thing that holds the ironist together, he also shows why this thing must ultimately pull the ironist apart. The mysterious element which makes the ironist—and therefore the *Seinfeld* players—cohere, is quite simply boredom. "Boredom, this eternity devoid of content, this salvation devoid of joy, this superficial profundity, this hungry glut" (CI, 285). Boredom is the continuity of the ironist's life in-

¹¹Cited in *Entertainment Weekly*, 22.

sofar as it is the ultimate motivation behind the ironist's longing to remain suspended from actuality. Hovering above themselves in suspension, the ironists fear that becoming their true selves in relation to actuality will be boring. So George must continue to create personalities to avoid boredom. Kramer must continue to devise schemes to avoid boredom. Elaine must continue to have relationships to avoid boredom. Jerry must continue to live in their shadows to avoid boredom.

And now we must come full circle to consider again this "show about nothing." We must now take those words with all their literal worth and existential sadness. The show is precisely about "nothing" in that at each and every moment it is avoiding "something"—reality, actuality, truth. The distortions become clear: what the players view as the negative—boredom—is truly the positive—actuality. Consequently, what we see as the expression of their characters—George's lying, Kramer's schemes, Elaine's relationships, Jerry's observations—is truly the expression of their lack of character.

The So-what Question . . . Conclusions

But so what? Can't the ironist "poetize" the boredom as well? Why can't there be a "bored George," for example? And have we really gotten anywhere in evaluating the show? Isn't it still funny, regardless of whatever sophisticated existentialist philosophy we throw at it? The problem with such questions is that boredom's gloominess is infectious. Once we realize that something we thought was smart, dazzling and dizzying is really boring, it is no longer entertaining. And once we realize that something we thought was hilarious is really boring, it is no longer funny. When boredom is all that provides continuity, it has a way of deflating even the highest spirits. Nothingness cannot provide the base forever, because "what is not true for God is true for man—out of nothing comes nothing" (CI, 281).

It seems the actors behind the characters have realized this. Jerry Seinfeld, speaking about the end of the show, states it in theatrical terms, "I just know from being on-stage for years and years and years, there's one moment where you have to feel the audience is still having a great time, and if you get off right there, they walk out of the theater excited. And yet, if you wait a little bit longer . . . they walk out feeling not as good."¹² Is this mysterious instant the inevitable moment when we become bored? Or could it also be when the actors themselves become bored? Jason Alexander (George) phrases it as one still trying to save his ironic soul, when he says that for all of them, "[the show] was becoming work, real work, and we were losing our sense of play. After 12 episodes, Jerry was weary . . . and he never wanted that weariness to affect the show. That was his greatest fear."¹³ *Work* . . . nothing left to *play* with? This is boredom. This is what the ironist *fears*. And as Kierkegaard predicted, the boredom which was always there—under the wry smiles, under the glib speech, under the crazy antics—will be *Seinfeld's* undoing.

Or is there another way out? Perhaps the boredom of absolute irony did not master the person after all, perhaps Jerry Seinfeld has mastered irony. Kierkegaard offers us hope for the possibility. Irony does not have to be absolute; it does not have to disengage the subject from actuality. In fact, "when the individual is properly situated—and this he is through the curtailment of irony—only then does irony have its proper meaning, its true validity" (CI, 326). Irony provides distance, insight, and a particular perspective. This is its function. When it goes towards infinity and becomes blinded by its own particularity, irony has mastered the subject. But we must hold these two in tension, and as Kierkegaard says, "even though one must warn against irony as against a seducer, so must one also commend it as a guide" (CI, 327). Perhaps Jerry Seinfeld has recognized that the show, if not halted, would rush headlong into the oblivion of its own bizarre universe, and thus lose its relevance for us.

And we, the fans of *Seinfeld*, the loyal audience, the insiders who have shared in the ironic speech and the whole ironic perspective—should we lament that it is coming to an end? No. We must simply realize that extreme irony cannot keep the laughs coming forever. If the players kept playing, and we kept watching, two things could happen: we

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would realize—if we haven't already—that emptiness and nothingness are ultimately not funny, or, even worse, we would mistake the ironic *Seinfeld* universe for reality, thereby missing actuality itself, and doing considerable damage to our souls. As it stands, we have laughed a lot, are not yet bored, and are relatively unscathed. Let's keep it that way. Beware of the reruns.

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¹²*Time*, pp. 78-79.

¹³*Time*, p. 79.

Book Reviews

By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine

By Ellen T. Charry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). 264 pp.

Reviewed by Adam Neder

Ellen Charry is in her first year as the Margaret W. Harmon associate professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, having previously taught in the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. Her book *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* was published just prior to her arrival at Princeton.

Ellen Charry's argument is fueled by a simple and robust idea. Christian doctrine ought to be good for us. It ought to shape character, to instill excellence, to help us flourish. It should be, in a word, salutary. Of course professor Charry does not offer this as a new insight. Indeed, the unoriginality of this thesis is precisely her point. Classical texts of Christian theology, she argues, began with this assumption. It was built into them. The theologians who shaped the Christian tradition assumed that human happiness, the good life, was predicated on knowing and loving God, and their theology was written to help readers experience such lives. Explanations of the divine pedagogy were offered for a practical purpose. They were intended to transform readers or listeners into more virtuous human beings.

However, such is no longer the case. Charry argues that contemporary theologians have shirked this responsibility. Theology is no longer intended to be aretogenic (Charry's word). It does not aim to instill and cultivate *arete*—moral excellence, virtue—in the reader. Instead theology since the seventeenth century has become nervously preoccupied with epistemology and method. In the wake of Locke, Hume and Kant, modern theologians have lost confidence in their ability to talk about God, and have become embarrassed by the premodern rationality which links faith and reason, truth and goodness, knowledge and obedience. Whereas premodern theology stressed knowledge as sapience, i.e. knowledge which "includes

correct information about God but emphasizes attachment to that knowledge," modern theology pursues a disengaged "intellectual justification of the faith, apart from the practice of the Christian life." The result is that theology ceased to be practical. Likewise truth came to be understood as nothing more than intellectual assent to correct information. But given the demise of theological realism and the retreat to symbolic theological language, it is questionable whether or not assent to such "correct information" is even considered possible. The consequence is that modern theology has become simultaneously timid and technical. Professor Charry's book offers an alternative to this state of affairs.

Drawing the stark conclusion that "secular culture seems to have spent its moral and intellectual capital and therefore now provides only diminished assistance to theology," Charry turns to the Christian tradition for guidance. Her study unfolds chronologically. She first treats Paul and Matthew, then she moves to Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea and Augustine, next Anselm, Aquinas and Julian of Norwich, and she concludes with Calvin. Her aim in treating each theologian is to uncover the pastoral insights embedded within their doctrinal articulations. She writes, "Christian doctrine functions pastorally when a theologian unearths the divine pedagogy in order to engage the reader or listener in considering that life with the triune God facilitates dignity and excellence." Charry's goal is to show how each theologian accomplishes this task. One particularly compelling aspect of this study is the way she allows the writers to speak for themselves. One does not get the sense that Charry is turning these theologians into mouthpieces for her private conclusions. Furthermore, she is careful neither to assign inflated importance to peripheral

Ellen Charry's argument is fueled by a simple and robust idea. Christian doctrine ought to be good for us. It ought to shape character, to instill excellence, to help us flourish. It should be, in a word, salutary.

ideas, nor to disfigure the unique thought patterns of each writer. It is, however, possible to detect two common ideas which reappear, in one form or another, in each chapter.

The first is the assumption that human beings become what they know. In her introduction Charry makes the point that these theologians would have resisted a choice

Adam Neder is an M.Div. middler at Princeton Theological Seminary.

between the primacy of knowledge or the primacy of practice as a means of character formation—instead holding the two together as mutually instructive. However, throughout the book the Pauline insight that, “character reform requires a renewing of the mind,” is repeatedly emphasized. Of course what is meant is not merely an accumulation of cognitive data, but rather a knowledge which engages the whole person—intellectually, emotionally, morally and spiritually. Without such knowledge, virtuous character formation will not take place. For Athanasius, “formation of a new self-concept [is] grounded in knowing the Father of Jesus Christ.” For Basil, “the key to becoming divine is knowledge of God.” For Augustine, “the reform of the mind is necessary for knowing God.” And for Calvin, “it is impossible to glorify God unless we know him.” Quotes are also readily available from Matthew, Anselm, Thomas and Julian which illustrate that for all of these theologians a renewal of the mind is necessary if virtuous character is to be formed within the reader.

A second assumption all chapters hold in common is the view that God is graciously inclined towards humanity. God does not humiliate and shame fallen humanity, but is instead gentle with it, treating it more like a loving parent

Doctrine ought not, to use Calvin's words, "flit about at the top of the brain," but should instead, "take root in the depth of the heart." It should transform the lives of its readers. It should be dynamic. But [Charry] also writes that, "Nothing could be farther from my intention," than for one to draw the conclusion that "the norm of salutariness is the primary norm guiding all theology."

than an angry tyrant. Of course this does not automatically entail the belief that God is without wrath or that he does not punish sin—far from it. But it does mean that God aims to draw humanity to himself by encouraging them to become aware of the dignity which he has bestowed upon them. Theology, then, functions pastorally when it edifies and transforms readers by persuading them of their God-given dignity and worth. One might expect to find this emphasis in a thinker such as Athanasius, about whom Charry writes, “There is no hint of anger, revenge, or contempt on God's part . . . God always appeals to our strengths, to coax them out of hiding, as it were, and make our nobility in him the foundation of our identity.” Or in Julian who holds that, “proper self-knowledge come[s] not from the fear of punishment but from clinging to God's love and mercy.” But Charry finds this theme present in the other theologians as well. Particularly interesting is Charry's argument for the role this belief plays in Calvin's theology. It is clear that Calvin's anthropology differs

starkly from the more optimistic Julian, as does it from Athanasius. “Calvin,” Charry writes, “holds tenaciously to the view that God requires that we come face to face with the worst that is in us. We must throw ourselves on God's mercy knowing that we deserve nothing but wrath and condemnation.” However, it is precisely God's mercy and not his wrath which Calvin emphasizes. It is true that humanity is utterly riddled with sin, but nonetheless the *imago dei* is still present, albeit utterly deformed, within human beings. And it is the presence of the *imago*, and not the reality of human guilt, which functions as “the foundation of Calvin's psychology and pedagogy.” The *imago dei* plays a decisive pastoral role in Calvin's theology—it engenders hope in the undeserving sinner that he or she has the capacity to be loved by God. It is true that God hates sin, but he has mercifully chosen to love humanity in light of the *imago* which he has placed within them. In the Atonement, the guilt which attends to human sin is transferred to Christ. But it is surprising to note the degree of emphasis which Calvin places on the subjective result of this occurrence within the individual rather than on the objective satisfaction of God's wrath. To be sure God's wrath is assuaged, but it is a pastoral point which Calvin wants to underscore in the minds of his readers when he writes, “Christ was offered to the Father as an expiatory sacrifice, that when he discharged all satisfaction through his sacrifice, *we might cease to be afraid of God's wrath*” (emphasis added). Calvin's aim is to imbue his readers with trust in God's mercy. Thus Charry concludes that Calvin's “aretegenic goal is to encourage sinners that while they deserve only wrath, God's love prevails. This way they will focus on God's love rather than his wrath and will be encouraged in virtue.”

I highlight these two themes not in order to suggest that they exhaust the content of Charry's study. On the contrary they are simply intended to illustrate the goal and flavor of her work, and to whet the reader's appetite for more.

Despite the many strengths of her study, one objection which I suspect will be raised as further discussion of this book takes place concerns Charry's view of truth. It will be argued that Charry is endorsing a consequentialist view of truth. That is, a view which argues for the truthfulness of a given statement strictly on the basis of the practical effects that statement will have on the reader. And indeed isolated sentences within the book may lend themselves to such a reading. However, before one makes this judgment, one would do well to keep the larger context in mind—to pay attention to what Charry is and is not attempting to do in this book. It is clear that she is deeply concerned that the Enlightenment has truncated truth by severing it from goodness, and as a result truth is now understood as being “amoral and aspiritual.” In response she calls theology to “reclaim a truly theological understanding of truth, which engages believers in the wisdom of God.” And, possibly even more radically, she calls theologians to “think of themselves as pastors helping people to find their identity in God.” In order for both of these changes to take place, a view of truth as mere “correct information,” devoid of moral, emotional and spiritual attachment to that which is known, will not suffice. Instead Charry has urged us to recapture

what is lacking from the modern understanding of truth—namely its moral, emotional and spiritually transformational dimensions. It makes sense then that she has focused on the results which Christian doctrine has in the lives of those who read it. Indeed the goal of her book is to uncover and articulate the aretogenic insights which drive the theologians she treats. And thus it is also appropriate that she emphasizes the places where these theologians reason in an *a posteriori* fashion. However, she has not therefore argued for a conception of truth which excludes the component of “correct information.” In fact she is clear that while sapience involves much more than intellectual assent to correct information, nonetheless it does include at least as much. For Charry, while it is the responsibility of the theologian to use good judgment in knowing what to say and when to say it, the material content of Christian doctrine is by no means indefinitely elastic. Her point is rather that doctrine ought not, to use Calvin’s words, “flit about at the top of the brain,” but should instead, “take root in the depth of the heart.” It should transform the lives of its readers. It should be dynamic. But she also writes that, “Nothing could be farther from my intention,” than for one to draw the conclusion that “the norm of salutariness is the primary norm guiding all theology.” Thus, to conclude that Charry is endorsing a consequentialist understanding of truth is to pay insufficient attention to important nuances in her argument. And ultimately to miss her point.

In a time when the Christian theological tradition is deeply suspect in many quarters, Charry’s turn to it for guidance is a bold move. She examines it with the assumption that it actually has something relevant to say to us, indeed more relevant than most of what is presently being said. This does not mean, however, that she is espousing a servile conformity to the tradition. Repetition is clearly not what she is advocating. What she has done instead is mined the tradition and shown that classical theologians were very often motivated to write Christian doctrine for pastoral reasons and towards pastoral ends. Her argument is that if Christian theology is ever going to regain its voice and begin to flourish afresh it must embrace its responsibility to function pastorally. And as theology continues to lurch farther and farther towards the margins of secular culture, the academy and even the church, Charry’s point becomes all the more compelling.

A Case Against Accident and Self-Organization

By Dean L. Overman (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997). 244 pp.

Reviewed by Jay Wesley Richards

Recently I was tutoring a high school student in basic chemistry. We came to the obligatory chapter on matter and

energy. The text gave a few uncontroversial definitions of matter and energy, and offered some obvious examples. However, amidst the conclusions of hard science, the authors had placed a materialistic dogma, disguising it as an assured result of scientific scholarship. They said: “In the universe, everything is either matter or energy. THERE IS NOTHING ELSE.” Those capitalized words were in the text itself. Now I was disturbed, and took the opportunity to point out that this claim was really a materialistic dogma and not a deliverance of knowledge of chemistry. The student didn’t much care; she just wanted to finish the assignment. For my part, I was frustrated by such a blatant attempt at materialistic indoctrination. Still, I was also perversely gratified, because the text confirmed one of my pet hunches, namely, that materialists inevitably contradict themselves. In this case, they didn’t tarry long. On the same page on which the authors declared that there was nothing but matter and energy, they introduced *properties*, and gave several examples of such entities. Apparently the authors did not notice that admitting the existence of properties contradicted their original claim.

This experience illustrates two important facts about materialistic philosophy in the natural sciences. (1) It is pervasive and presupposed, and (2) it can’t account for all the things we know and observe.

Of course, for most of this century, we have been led to believe that the sciences were daily confirming the truth of materialism. This claim still has its avid proponents such as Richard Dawkins. However, important discoveries within science itself have started to undermine the plausibility of purely materialistic explanations, and perceptive people are beginning to point this out. One such perceptive person is Dean Overman. In *A Case Against Accident and Self-Organization*, Overman, a lawyer by training, analyzes the probability, on standard probability definitions, that accidental processes could produce living matter from non-living matter, and that a universe compatible with life could emerge accidentally. So the two fields he focuses on are molecular biology and particle astrophysics. Theologians, biblical scholars and the like may fear that these subjects are obscure to the non-specialist. Admittedly, some of Overman’s treatment is tough-sledding; but it would be difficult to underestimate the importance of his subject for Christians.

Without descending into technical details here, we can describe his general argument. Consider first molecular biology. The idea that life arose in a prebiotic soup on the early earth is now common in the scientific lore. The famous Miller-Urey experiment of the 1950’s, which produced trace amino acids by running an electrical current through certain gases, inspired many to conclude that the origin of life problem was more or less solved. However, once one realizes the requirements which origin-of-life scenarios must meet, one sees that the probability of even the most rudimentary living matter emerging from inorganic matter is astronomically small. Mathematicians usually regard as impossible anything with a probability of less than one in 10^{50} . However, even that probability is immensely high compared to the chance for the accidental emergence of life. While there is disagreement in the field as to just what that probability is, all the calculations for the chance

Jay Wesley Richards is a Ph.D. candidate in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.

emergence of life are mind-boggling. For example, Fred Hoyle and Chandra Wickramasinghe have estimated it at one in $10^{40,000}$. Harold Morowitz has calculated the probability of the random emergence of a bacterium at one in $10^{100,000,000,000}$. Such figures trivialize the results of the Miller-Urey experiment, as well as related ones.

Not surprisingly, many scientists and theorists have been looking for another explanation for the origin of life than mere random emergence. Many of them place their hopes in theories of self-organization. Such theories point to the emergence of order from systems far from equilibrium, that is, from chaotic systems. Examples include the water vortex that forms when a drain plug is pulled, and a tornado emerging from apparently chaotic meteorological activity. The implication is that the scientist should search for similar self-organization principles in matter that led to the emergence of life.

Examples of self-organization are interesting. Unfortunately, they are beside the point. They explain what does not need explaining. The relevant issue for organic systems is not mere order, but complexity, or more precisely, *specified complexity or information*. Self-organization theorists are notorious for equivocating with these terms, sometimes even treating "complexity" and "order" as synonyms. In fact, they are quite different, and in some cases, are opposites.

It is not mere order that distinguishes living from nonliving systems. Many things are ordered, but are in fact relatively simple. What distinguishes life is the presence of high complexity or information content. The information content of a system, such as a DNA molecule, is the minimum number of instructions necessary to specify the structure. Many ordered systems require remarkably few instructions, because they are periodic. That is, the instructions repeat themselves, and the composite form appears ordered. An excellent example of periodic order is a crystal, which contains an aesthetically pleasing order; but in terms of information content, a crystal is remarkably simple.

A helpful analogy for comprehending simple periodic order is a computer program. One could make a highly ordered computer program to mimic Jack Torrance's cabin-fever inspired "novel" in *The Shining*. The program would need only two basic instructions: (1) Type "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," and (2) Repeat rule (1). This program would produce figures on a page with a highly ordered appearance, like a crystal, but would have a very low information content as a program. (Of course the *meaning* of the English sentence in rule (1) is very rich in information; but that is another matter.)

Such repetitive order is not analogous to the complexity which life exhibits. The information contained in a DNA molecule is profoundly irregular and aperiodic, like the meaning inherent in an encyclopedia. To speak of this type of complexity as "emerging" from mere physico-chemical properties makes no more sense than to speak of *The Shining* as emerging from the properties of ink and paper. We all know perfectly well that *The Shining* required a bridge, namely, the somewhat twisted mind of Stephen King. We cannot reduce the novel to the paper it is written on. Similarly, the biological order, in which we discover

complexity, is not reducible to the physico-chemical order. In a profound sense, the former order transcends the latter, just as the novel *The Shining* transcends the medium in which it was written.

Overman offers the same general argument with respect to the improbability of the precision of values in particle astrophysics. These improbabilities have to do not with the emergence of life specifically, but with a universe whose properties are compossible with life. Only a universe with extreme fine-tuning in its initial conditions, such as the strength of the four fundamental forces and the structure of quantum particles, is congenial to life. The strength of the strong and weak nuclear forces, gravity, and the electromagnetic force, must all fall within infinitesimally small parameters. The realization that the universe is expanding from an initial moment (the "Big Bang") some time in the finite past forestalls the easy option of appealing to infinite time and an infinite universe. Probability calculations for such conditions led atheist astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle to conclude that a superintellect had surely "monkeyed" with physics.

So, once we consider the improbability of the accidental emergence of life, the specified complexity which life exhibits, and the apparent fine-tuning of the laws of physics, the preponderance of the evidence suggests "that a Person, not chance and the laws of physics and chemistry, caused and is causing life." Of course, how one evaluates the evidence for such personal activity will be deeply shaped by the metaphysical assumptions one brings to the question. Overman realizes this, and so begins his book with a treatment of the influence of such metaphysical assumptions, and their propensity to encourage faulty reasoning. His subtext is apparent: the mounting evidence from molecular biology and particle physics points not toward a materialistic or naturalistic explanation for the universe and the life it contains, but toward a personal or theistic one. Materialistic blinders obscure one's ability to follow this evidence where it leads.

This conclusion is obviously not a full blown natural theological argument for the Triune God of Christian belief. It does not purport to be. Nevertheless, it is far more congenial to the Christian understanding than is, say, Carl Sagan's confession that the "Cosmos" is all there is, all there ever has been, and all there ever will be.

Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity

By Bruce Bawer (Crown Publishers, NY, 1997).

Reviewed by Thomas Vito Aiuto

Working at a local coffee shop affords me a number of significant benefits, not the least of which is the chance to interact with people outside of Princeton Seminary's

Thomas Vito Aiuto is an M.Div. senior at Princeton Theological Seminary.

sometimes insular community. But some of the contact I've had there is disappointing in that it doesn't seem to matter whether one is "churched" or not, or whether that "church" is far to the left or the right: the same biases and generalizations prevail in nearly everyone's thinking.

For instance, I recently came to work wearing a shirt which my fiancée found on the street near her apartment in Manhattan's East Village (coffeemaking being the messy business it is, one does well to be as stewardly as possible when it comes to attire). Apparently this t-shirt was from some sort of recreational softball or baseball team, because there is a number sewn on the back and a small drawing of an outstretched player reaching for a fly ball on the breast. Beneath the player are the words "God Squad." Apparently this last detail was enough to pique the interest of one of my coffee patrons, for while busily banging away on the espresso machine one afternoon, my attention was somewhat gained by a twenty-something who was peering intently at my eclectic garment.

"Is that one of those evangelical Christian things?"

"What?"

"Your shirt. I thought it might be one of those scary fundamentalist things."

"I'm not really sure. My fiancée found it and gave it to me."

My new friend smiled knowingly at my response, glad to have found out that we must be on the same team. I wasn't one of those Christians, let alone an evangelical or a fundamentalist (they're the same thing, right?) I was merely an open-minded guy like himself with a Gen-X penchant for irony and irreverence in that I was wearing this nutty shirt, which probably used to belong to some backwater buck-toothed bumpkin who carried his Bible in a faux-leather case. Besides, even if I was a Christian, my acquaintance had almost guaranteed that I wouldn't want to claim it too quickly. He had fenced me in with that most ruinous of terms, the one that all but the most brave (or the most dispensational; but more on that later) Christian will be willing to walk for miles to get around, the thing that nobody wants to be: a fundamentalist.

Bruce Bawer's new book, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* employs just this strategy, dividing American Christendom into two distinct camps, and raising flags over each that make it clear which side any sensible person would want to be on. On the right (and this is important, for Bawer goes to great lengths to identify oppressive, fundamentalist Christianity with the agenda of the Republican party) are those whom he decries as, at various turns, conservative, traditional, fundamentalist, or exclusionist Christians. On the left are what he calls the liberal, modern, or inclusionist Christians. Eventually recognizing the insufficiency of these terms and acknowledging that fundamentalism properly defined has nothing to do with much of what he attacks in the book (Bawer retains it for the title because, he says, "most Americans employ fundamentalist as a general label for conservative Christians,") he settles on delineating between the two groups as the "Church of Law" and the "Church of Love." He then proceeds from the first chapter on to paint a picture of the "Church of Law" that would make all but the strictest inerrantist blush, employing a systematic smear

campaign that is eerily similar to the vindictive practices of which he accuses the conservative Christian groups he deplores.

The content of the book is actually quite innocuous relative to the scope of modern scholarship about the church; it is a layperson's report of hypotheses, assumptions and accusations that are fairly standard in progressive circles¹: Jesus never made any doctrinal demands or creedal statements, and never spoke about divine judgment, and when the Scriptures say he did we can assume it to be a "later interpolation" (p.41); Paul is responsible for making Jesus' 'Church of Love' into the 'Church of Law' (p.54ff); the theology of the Ecumenical councils twisted the truth of Jesus into "an institutional and dogmatic church" (p.57). At some points, however, it becomes preposterously vindictive: "... the problem with legalistic Christianity is not simply that it affirms that God can be evil; it's that it imagines a manifestly evil God and calls that evil good. In effect, as we shall see, it worships evil." (author's italics, p.10) Finding this sort of statement in the first ten pages makes it difficult to continue, inasmuch as one knows that what is to be found in the rest of the book will be less an evenhanded presentation, and more a polemic, purposefully catered for those who already agree with the author on ecclesiastical and spiritual matters.

And that is just the problem, with this book, and with the phenomenon of "the F-word" in general. It eliminates any grounds for discussion. It sets the boundaries beforehand to make any dialogue completely moot. No matter any factual flaws which get in your way (as in Bawer's reference to "nineteenth-century Catholic historian Philip Schaff," or the Matthean baptismal formula given as "I baptize you in the name of Jesus"), not to mention any larger logical or theological mistakes. Just plow ahead with your opinions, grounded only on secular, rationalist perspectives. For example, Bawer doesn't bother to ever clearly define what he even means by "fundamentalist:" does he mean it in the contemporary sense, marked by, among other theological boundaries, premillennial dispensationalism, an ethic of separation, holiness codes, and a doctrine of Biblical inerrancy which is completely contentious to the notion of Biblical criticism in any form, and as such is bound to a woefully literalistic interpretation of the Bible? This seems to be the case from his numerous references to John Nelson Darby and the Scofield Reference Bible. But if that's true, then the charge of fundamentalism is completely

¹To note, Bawer girds up his arguments with support from Paul Tillich, Hans Kung, Harry Emerson Fosdick, John Dominic Crossan, Walter Rauschenbusch, and, inexplicably, Huston Smith. On the other hand, as representative of orthodox Christianity (the 'Church of Law') he most often quotes John Nelson Darby, C.I. Scofield, Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, James Dobson, and (you're not going to believe this) Frank Peretti. While he is very adept at demolishing all of these ready-made strawmen, one wonders if he could have mustered up at least the appearance of an honest defense of orthodox Christianity. C.S. Lewis, Karl Barth, Alister McGrath, and Peter Kreeft come to mind, to name just a few, as voices he might have included.

off-base for nearly every individual and group he attacks (Pat Robertson, Richard John Neuhaus, the PromiseKeepers, the Southern Baptist Convention; he even lumps Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses under this heading). These distinctions, however, are ultimately inconsequential. What remains for Bawer is the importance of seeing that his vision for the church (liberal Episcopalian) is the only sensible, loving option; all others suffer from legalistic, hateful delusions. And this, as I mentioned, is also what remains for anyone who throws the "F-Word" around indiscriminately. Scratching a line in the sand which makes everyone on your side of things at least tolerable, but all of those on the other side ("those fundamentalists!") so completely frivolous as to be beyond reason.

My friend in the coffeeshop was no fool. He knew that nobody wants to be a fundamentalist, so he was safe in using the term. But make no mistake, to him anyone who would even claim to be a Christian could probably qualify as one, even a left-leaning Episcopalian; yet to the Episcopalian, a moderate Methodist would fit the bill; to the Methodist, a PC(USA) Presbyterian just might suffice. Within the PC(USA) itself, a McCormick Seminary friend of mine can accuse me of being a fundamentalist because I attend Princeton. No problem! I know someone from an independent evangelical church who went to Fuller Seminary. Now she's the real fundamentalist. Unless you

compare her to a PCA Presbyterian I know at Westminster Seminary. He's a fundamentalist; that is, until he passes the buck to an independent Baptist at Bob Jones. And the buck stops there. Because that poor soul would be the only Christian of the lot who could rightfully claim the name fundamentalist, or want to for that matter.²

The 'F-Word' is a useful tool for garnering allies who already see your side of things, and for stopping conversation with those who don't. Bawer realizes this fully. There may be some redeeming qualities in Bawer's book; he does give an interesting, if skewed, history of the development of Protestantism in the United States which may be interesting to an uninformed layreader. But most of the value gets lost in the vitriolic rhetoric he is careful to employ throughout which makes Calvin and Luther's bitterest venom sound positively genteel in comparison. If anything can be taken away from this book, it is an understanding of how not to engage your opposition. And, not to use the 'F-Word.'

PTR

²That is, of course, until our dispensationalist Baptist friend begins to rail against the fundamentalist Muslims who rule Iran, at which point we may have to start over.

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